UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

Zero Recall and other stories

by

Astrid Jennifer Blodgett

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Resarch in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Zero Recall and other stories* submitted by Astrid Jennifer Blodgett in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

Zero Recall and other stories is a collection of eight short stories set, for the most part, in contemporary (sub)urban Alberta. As a whole it portrays numerous dissolved or dissolving relationships, particularly those found in families or other close relationships — people who may have come together by chance or by ignorance. The stories are quasi-realist evocations of character or mood concerned with who we are and why we do what we do or feel what we feel. They were written, in part, to learn what makes a story a story, today.

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Ben's squinting over at me. He's just asked what I think of the tomato, anchovy, and artichoke salad illustrating the front cover of his latest acquisition, *The Glass House Cookbook*. I'm trying to get through this mail. There's always junk in the mail. Junk, junk, junk. You, Krista Martin, are the lucky winner of the Great Western Sweepstakes. Just fill in the form and answer the following skill-testing question before November 10 *without* mechanical aid. Or: pair of socks, yours free, with the purchase of any one pair of Nike Air Icarus running shoes. *Mail*, I want *real mail* — here's something, from the Canadian Red Cross. As if they don't get enough attention in the news these days, now they have to come right to my mailbox. This is probably a reminder that I haven't donated for two whole months. They're getting so bloody impatient these days, like they're desperate or something. Once, you could donate your blood and they didn't want to see you again for ninety days. Then it was seventy-four. Now it's fifty-six. In a few years, they'll be asking for monthly donations.

"Or d'you want sardines on toast?" Ben asks.

"Uh, what?"

"This awesome-looking salad or sardines on toast?" He slides his fingers through my hair and gives a gentle pull. A trick disguised as affection when really he wants my attention. "I'm itching to try something from this book. It's so yuppy-ish. I want to know what yuppies eat. D'you think I should wear a tie? I mean, we could

even dress up for this kind of dinner. How about . . . Belgian endive with a dill sauce?"

"Ug, I'd rather have witchety grubs," I say. He makes a face and I start to read this letter from the Red Cross, this letter that's supposed to be a reminder or maybe an invitation to their annual award ceremony because I just have to make one more donation and I'll have filled that little 450-millilitre sack with my blood fifty times. But there's something else in this letter, something I don't think I'm reading, something I don't exactly want to read and am *sure* I'm not reading but the letter is real, the scrawl after the "Yours Sincerely" is real and the form on the second page that you have to cut off and return to the Red Cross so they can release information to your doctor *in confidence* thanks to some ancient bureaucracy —

"Krista, what?" Ben says and I see that my hand is on his arm just now, on his arm to feel him or maybe to keep from falling down. Funny how his arm is always there, right there.

"This letter," I say, my tongue slowing down, "this letter, does it say what I think it says, does it say —" and here I put on this mock formal voice we sometimes do together when we're goofing around but this time my voice is becoming thicker and thicker like a big dry sponge, "'although you may be otherwise healthy, we can no longer accept — Federal government regulations' —" Now I'm moving my mouth but no sound is coming out. They've given me this thing they call a *zero recall*. Meaning *don't come back*. Ben is pulling the letter from me with one hand, putting his arm on my shoulder with the other, scanning the letter, desperately hoping the letter will reveal

to him what isn't there. His eyes flit back and forth, alert and intense, the way he looks at me when he's trying to work out something I did and doesn't like or understand like when I accidentally knocked his soapstone whale off the shelf and it broke in three pieces or the day, months after the tornado, when I told him that nothing I had charged on my VISA that day had come through, look, we got all these things free, my brown sandals and your Eddie Bauer jacket and that lamp in the bedroom, a freak of nature, Ben, a *blip*. Or when he wants to know something and I won't say it, I hold it in as long as I can, wanting and not wanting to tell the longer he looks at me, a ruthless tease. I fall back against the counter, watching his eyes move over the letter the way they move over my face and I want to speak but no sound comes out.

"What is this," he whispers, shaking the letter gently, "what is this?"

I don't know, I want to say, the letter tells me nothing, I know nothing, I can remember nothing that happened before now, Friday the twenty-eighty of October and it's late now, after seven, too late to call anyone who knows anything. I remember that sometime today I worked and after work we went to buy groceries, crazy on a Friday night, going to Superstore, but everything we do seems to be crazy and spontaneous. Look, there's Ben and me making our way slow-motion up and down the aisles of Superstore, slow because we're pretending we're a Duke and Duchess, for whom eating is not boring necessity but art, slow because the aisles are congested with titanic shopping carts and children hanging off them, one arm or one leg hooked over the side, and women with large bulky handbags hanging from their shoulders, and a bird, yes, a

bird, a cockatiel halfway down the cookie aisle sitting on the shoulder of a man with long red hair.

I move outside to the balcony and Ben follows. I hold the railing and look down at the cars, thinking whatever it is the letter isn't saying it can only mean one thing, there is only one reason for zero recall. When I turn to look at Ben, slowly, Ben who is looking, mesmerized, down at the line of traffic five stories below moving eastward along Saskatchewan Drive, purposefully, I know he must be thinking the same thing.

In the cookie aisle there was a man with a cockatiel on his shoulder, remember, Ben, I want to say, and I laugh lightly, my voice cracking in the crisp October air. My shoulders are cold now and Ben's arms are somewhere else. He is holding himself to the railing and looking down at the cars and thinking things I can't hear, can't even imagine and I thought I knew him. Dry yellow leaves separate from the elm in front of us and float slowly over my neck and arms. Ben sweeps brown leaves from the balcony with his foot. The children hanging from the cart in the pasta aisle are pulling pasta from the shelves. Cartons of linguini, macaroni, canneloni, vermicelli, lasagna, tortellini, spaghettini tumble into the titanic cart, filling it for next week and the week after that and the week after that till all the cartons begin to topple to the floor.

"When was this?" Ben asks. His voice is coarse and heavy in the dark. We are lying in bed now where blankets hide my shivering arms and legs and I wonder how I came to be here, how I got here from the balcony watching the cars. In this dark I cannot see him, I can only imagine him and his body held now so that I cannot reach

him or touch him. I can only hear his voice, his question, and know that his sleepless eyes must scan the dark the way they scanned the letter.

When was what, I want to ask, when was what, do you think I have this thing they tell me I have, when was what, do you really mean who was he and when did we do it, is that what you mean?

"Talk to me, when was this?" Ben repeats. His voice is softer now and farther away. When I close my eyes I am no longer certain he is here. The air is so cold I can see my breath. I pull two cans of Bel-Air grapefruit juice from the cooler and move on, move our huge and carelessly empty cart past the redhaired man with the cockatiel and the children hanging from their overflowing cart, move toward the photo section for batteries. We need batteries for the walkman and a roll of film because tomorrow is Saturday, tomorrow we are going to Elk Island to sit by the lake and take sideways photographs of the bison, crooked photographs of the trees, silly photographs of ourselves, anything ridiculous, you are never serious when you are having so much fun. *Tomorrow is Saturday and*. I could say that, once, with such certainty.

Moonlight cuts jagged streaks into Ben's face. He is still awake, two in the morning and he is staring straight up at the ceiling, his forehead twisted, his eyes red. I think only of mistakes, of human error, of mechanical error, a blip, *somebody has blundered* said someone over and over. On Monday I will telephone, I will pick up the grey telephone and speak with the one who has made this error, I will put things right and you will know me again as you did before, I will be able to say again *tomorrow we*. But I cannot say it yet, not yet, because I am not so sure.

Stacks and stacks of film hang from thin metal hooks next to the counter where a woman is standing, a woman with a large and bulky handbag with green beads and braids dangling from it. And her. As I reach forward she turns, swinging her handbag, and knocks Fuji from my hand and sends the racks of film crashing to the floor. There are Ben and me in slow motion pushing our massive, empty shopping cart toward the check-out without film, the film abandoned among the others on the floor where the woman kneels and the cockatiel flies and squawks agitatedly overhead, filling the air with small grey and orange feathers. Suddenly something goes wrong. We are pushing the cart back to the freezer aisle. I throw the juice back into the cooler. The profoundly heavy cart only becomes heavier. I return the mangoes to the fruit section and the pastrami to the deli and the cart grows still heavier. Even when the cart is completely empty it takes all my strength to move it and I do, all night, retracing our steps to the film which we inadvertently left behind.

"When was this?" the voice is thick and slow and heavy. Ben is sitting across the kitchen table from me. His hand is curled around a sea-blue coffee cup.

I sit up and look at him. I see now that I have misunderstood his question. I thought he was asking *me*.

Yes, I say. When was this. And wait for his answer. I see that there is a cup of coffee in front of me. Did we remember the film, what happened to the film, I want to ask, because I can't remember. We were pushing a cart and then we were here. Something went wrong and we forgot it, had to go back for it, what.

The telephone screeches suddenly, sending grey and yellow feathers floating above it. Ben picks up the receiver and speaks slowly, then listens for a long time to someone who has a good deal to say and when he hangs up the phone, he looks at me again, looks without his intense, searching eyes, his body lifeless now, and I say at last, slowly at first, then more quickly *there has been an error, somebody has blundered, there has been some mistake*, aware, as I speak, of the suddenness of the leaves floating past the window to the street.

Ben stands. He moves away, first toward the living room and then back to the kitchen, as if unsure where to go next. He throws his coffee into the sink. His body lurches suddenly as if he's about to gag. Then he grips the edge of the counter with both hands and twists his face into tight, swallowed scream.

Five stories below cars move past, without hesitation, without uncertainty. Ben and I pass each other in the kitchen or the hall or the living room, moving slowly through the apartment, not knowing which way to go, not knowing whether to sit or stand. The air is stifled. Our bodies are stunned. When night comes we lie again awake, vigilant. I try to say those little words, *tomorrow we*, those words that mean *Ben* and *me* and *together* and *later*, those words that were so simple once.

Monday before light arrives I stand on the balcony, my hands on the railing, my eyes roaming the street and the valley and Ben's car pulling into the traffic. I know his eyes are fixed on the pavement, his hands have a firm grip on the wheel and, like all the drivers moving past, he knows where he is going. When I can no longer see him I

take myself outside to the sidewalk, crunch through the scant remains of autumn, tear off tiny pieces of the letter and send them floating one by one into the leaves.

Ralph wasn't even Dwight's cat. But everybody was calling him about Ralph. Except, of course, his sister Edith. Edith was the owner of Ralph. Why should she do anything about her own cat when she had a brother who had no kids, no job, and nothing better to do than go house-hunting for a cat he didn't even know?

First his father called. "Edith is moving and needs to find a home for the cat. Do you know of anyone?"

"Sure," Dwight said glumly. He wished he could say "no," but his father would keep after him like he had about the yard he wanted him to clean. It wasn't even his father's yard. It wasn't even anyone he knew. It took four hours to go through all that rubbish. He tried to tell him he didn't have time for this. He had two part-time jobs. He tried to tell him that too. Didn't he know that a part-time job was really full-time for half the pay? Now, he was between jobs, so he figured people thought they could call him at any time of the day or night and ask him to do anything.

After his father called, Carole, his ex, called. "Your mother's been trying to find you." He could hear the kids screaming somewhere near the phone. They always screamed when Carole got on the phone. "You coming by with that cheque soon? I have to buy the kids new shoes." Dwight was thirty, but sometimes he felt like he was fourteen, the way everybody told him what to do.

"I'm coming soon," he lied. He would try to forget about the cheque as soon as he got off the phone. They weren't even his kids. Carole wasn't even really his ex.

They had lived together off and on for a couple years. Maybe it was six or seven now, he couldn't remember. He moved out whenever the kids drove him crazy but he could never be without Carole for too long. He helped out with the kids' clothes and things in return for the use of her car. That was the deal. Big deal. It was a lemon.

Then his best friend Wagner called. Wagner knew someone who would take a cat. They didn't care that it had a name like Ralph and sat around looking smug and fat all day. So when the phone rang at eight one morning and woke Dwight from a deep, groggy sleep, all he could do was mumble "I found a place for Ralph" and hang up. He found out later from Wagner that it was his old boss calling.

When he got home that night at eleven-thirty the red light on his answering machine was flashing. The light flashed like a red distress beacon in his black room. He looked away from the light and flopped onto his bed. He dozed off for a short time and a while later the phone rang. His body jumped. He swore. Who would be calling him in the middle of the night?

He didn't bother to pick up the phone. He was too dazed. He listened while his father spoke into the answering machine. "Morning, son," his father said cheerfully, "it's me. Where are you?"

Dwight lay in bed for a few minutes. He stared at the bands of light seeping in from around the curtains and under the door. It must be morning after all. He reached out his long arm and hit "play" on the machine.

"Dwight, it's Edith. I hear you found a home for Ralph. What's it like? What's the person like? Call me." The machine gave a shrill concluding beep.

Then Carole's voice, tired. "Just wondering if you were home. I guess not."

And then the gushy message his father had just left: "Morning, son. It's me. Where are you?" This is somebody's version of Hell, Dwight thought.

Dwight turned his back to the machine. He stared at the glass dots on the ceiling. He thought of stars. He still couldn't figure out which ones they were. The Big Dipper, you'd think that one would be there. When he was a kid he used to lie on his back on the cool, dewy grass and watch the stars. He was supposed to be an astronomer when he grew up. Or a doctor at the very least. He was a genius, after all. That's what they always said. When he dropped out of college, they kept saying it. His mother and father anyway.

He got up and showered. Why did they keep thinking that, he wondered. He had never been a success at anything. He had never had one job for more than a few months. He'd moved so many times he'd lost track. He was always starting over. Always leaving things at the places he left. Even the forks and knives. Sometimes he did it because that's what everybody said he did. They said he couldn't keep track of anything. And he could never get rid of Carole and her obnoxious kids. They would be leeching him forever.

Dwight stood so the water pelleted his face. He wanted to become numb, to stop thinking about who he was. He was tired of going over all these things in his mind. Round and round, and always ending up in the same place. What did all this thinking amount to anyway. How could he be a genius when he was just some guy who was always between jobs.

His answering machine light was flashing again when he got back to his room. He got a headache as soon as he saw the light. There was a message to call Edith. Something about Ralph being a human. Then Carole. Something about a cheque. And Amanda, a woman he'd met on a job. He wondered where he'd left her number. Probably inside a pack of cigarettes. He picked up a pair of jeans from the floor and felt the pockets. Nothing. He pulled on the jeans and grabbed a shirt that looked clean and put it on. Then he sorted through the shirts and jeans on the floor and the chair, feeling their pockets, and tossed them onto the bed. No cigarettes there either. Man, he was pissed. He had that tight feeling in his chest. His headache was getting worse. He wanted to scream. Or punch someone. He'd go to Carole's. Things were always better after he'd been with her. They would sit and talk and forget about everything. This had been going on for a while. Six months, eight months, something like that. He timed his visits for when the kids were out, and he always ended up staying. It wasn't always sex. Sometimes they just lay together in each other's arms and talked, and before Dwight knew it, a whole day had gone by.

He jumped in the car and turned the key. Nothing happened. Dwight thumped the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. "Why doesn't she take this in and have it fixed?" he muttered. He pulled out the choke and tried again. He could hear Carole saying, "You're always flooding it, Dwight." And she wasn't even there. So. He'd show her. He wouldn't flood it. He eased the pedal downward gently and released a little as the motor turned. "I'll show you," he said quietly.

He backed out of his stall and roared down the back alley. A few minutes later he pulled up in front of Carole's apartment building. He left the Mazda running and ran in, opening the doors with his old keys.

Carole flew past him, chasing one of the kids down the hall. Another kid was shouting something from the toilet seat through the open bathroom door. The usual morning routine. Nothing ever changed around here. Ellen, who was fourteen, the oldest, walked out of the kitchen and stared at him contemptuously.

"What are you doing here?" she said finally.

"I came to give your mother some money so she can buy you little twits your designer jeans and videos," Dwight replied. He frowned at her with the same look of scorn.

Carole appeared from the hall. "Dwight!" she said breathlessly. She smiled. "Where's your coat?"

He shrugged. He knew his coat was in his place somewhere, on a chair in the kitchen or in the living room. Maybe it'd warm up today and he wouldn't need it anyway. "Who needs a coat?"

"It's below zero out there! Look after yourself a little!" Carole cried. She gave him an exasperated look and reached into his shirt pocket. "You mind? I'm all out." She opened the packet of Du Mauriers and pulled out a cigarette. So that's where they were. She pushed the carton closed, then paused, holding it. She opened the carton again. "*Amanda*?" she said in a mocking voice. "*Your Jewel*? Really, Dwight, couldn't you do better?" She pushed the pack firmly back into his pocket and grabbed a lighter

from the kitchen table. She leaned against the counter and exhaled, watching him carefully. "You gonna call her?" she asked. He couldn't tell if she really wanted to know or if she was playing with him. He was in no mood for mind games.

"Isn't it time for the kids to go to school?" Dwight said. The kids had been standing in the hall watching Dwight and Carole. If only they'd just go. Then Dwight and Carole could be alone. Dwight remembered then that he'd left the car running. Maybe he hadn't really planned to stay here all day after all.

Carole nodded. "Get going, you guys," she said. "Time to catch the bus." They didn't move. "Go on," she said, firmer now.

"Didn't you buy us anything?" the youngest one asked.

Dwight glared at her. "Of course not. Get lost." But he couldn't help wishing, now that she'd asked, that he had. Why hadn't he thought to bring them something, some little thing, a Mars bar or a Coke? He watched her wistfully. He didn't mind her. She was only about eight. It was when they hit twelve that they turned into monsters.

"Beast," the middle one said. The other girls repeated it. The three of them put on their boots and coats, shouting, "Beast, beast." The kept this up after they left, calling it and laughing all the way down the long hallway to the stairs.

Dwight and Carole stared at each other.

"You gonna call her?" Carole asked again.

Dwight shrugged. "I brought the cheque."

Carole smoked in silence. "It's been a year now," she said at last. She didn't move in his direction at all. "I guess this will be your last cheque."

"What do you mean?" Dwight looked surprised.

"We agreed, a year, remember?" She slid her thumb along her lower lip. "Just leave it on the counter. I have to get ready for work." She walked down the hall slowly.

"Carole," Dwight called. The bedroom door closed after her.

"Just leave the cheque," she shouted through the door. Then she opened it and popped her head out into the hall. "And your father called. Tell your parents not to call here for you anymore!" The door slammed.

Dwight pulled his wallet from his jeans pocket. The cheque was already made out. He usually made it out a few weeks in advance and held on to it. He put it on the counter next to the ashtray. Suddenly he felt vile. The cheque felt vile. He wanted to tear it up. Or burn it. Instead he set the ashtray down firmly on top of it. Ashes floated onto his fingers. He stared at his hand as if he had a skin disease.

He walked slowly out to the car. He'd forgotten to ask about that. It was her car. And he never told his parents to call her, so she could just leave him alone about that.

When he pulled away he had no idea where he would go. His head began to throb. He drove around a bit but couldn't shake the throbbing. He wondered what he drank last night. Nothing much that he could remember. All he could see when he tried to think back now was a red light flashing in the dark.

He noticed that he was near Edith's home. He decided he would get the cat and deal with it once and for all. Then at least no one would be calling him about that anymore.

His sister lived in a small house with her husband and two kids. They would be doing their usual morning routine. Ned would be getting ready for work. Shaving maybe. Or telling the kids a funny story. Edith would be serving breakfast. Dwight felt hungry all of a sudden. Starving. Maybe Edith had made some coffee. He'd have her make some bacon and eggs and toast. Maybe everyone would be chatting away, taking their time, the way he always wanted it to be with him and Carole.

He hopped up the few steps to the door and rang the bell. He could see the older child, who was about three, approach the door. She couldn't open it, though. It was locked. Dwight waited, waving and feeling stupid. Finally Edith appeared with the baby in her arms.

"Dwight! It's you!" Edith said with surprise. "Come in. Did you get our message?"

Dwight looked past her blankly. He could see the kitchen from where he stood. Ned was there, sweeping something from the floor. The breakfast table had been cleared. Something wasn't right.

"I'd invite you in," Edith went on, "but we're just on our way to the doctor's."

The throbbing in Dwight's head became so intense at that moment he thought his whole head would explode. He tried to think clearly but his head just seemed to

turn foggy on him. "I've come for the cat," he heard himself say in a loud voice. "Where's the damn cat?"

"Didn't you get our message? Who is this person? What's the place like? Do they understand that Ralph is human?" The questions flashed his way like the light on the answering machine, sharp and insistent.

"Just give me the damn cat!" Dwight shouted. He stood there, watching Edith. Why wasn't she doing anything? How could she just stand there? Couldn't she see he had come for the cat?

The older child spotted the cat and ran after it. "That's right, Katie, get the cat for Uncle Dwight," said Dwight in the condescending tone he couldn't help using with kids. It started when he saw his mother making such a big deal out of Edith's kids. Fussing over them, bragging about them. They were just little kids. Not geniuses. Not future brain surgeons.

"Run, Ralph, run!" the child screamed. Dwight pushed past Edith and the baby and ran after the child. He followed her up the stairs and into the master bedroom. The cat darted into the closet. Then, it happened. His head began to explode. Little pieces of it flew all over the room. Little pieces of Edith and Ned and the baby screaming exploded with his head.

The child chased the cat out of the closet and it darted under the bed. Dwight picked up the child and put her outside the door and locked it after her. She was too stunned to scream or struggle. Dwight had no idea what he was doing or why. It all happened so fast. His head continued to explode into the sounds of Edith and Ned and

the child tapping on the door and calling him. "What's up, Dwight?" and "Can we do this later, Dwight, we'll be late." The whole room filled with pieces of their increasingly insistent knocking.

He crawled under the bed and reached for the cat. He managed to grab one foreleg. It drove its teeth into the flesh of Dwight's hand, near the thumb. Dwight let out a yowl and swore. With his free hand he reached up to the cat's neck and squeezed as hard as he could. Ralph shrieked and gasped and flipped its body from side to side. Slowly Dwight felt his head stop exploding and all the pieces slide gently back into place. He felt his anger seep out of him, the way water seeps into dry soil. Smooth and soft and satisfying.

Dwight pulled the cat out and looked at it. It didn't move. It didn't even breathe.

He got up calmly. The entire room had become quiet. Even the noise outside had stopped. It might have stopped a while ago, but he couldn't tell. He only knew that things were peaceful now.

He heard Edith say softly, "Just let us in please Dwight. Dwight."

When he didn't answer, he heard Ned's voice. "We're not going to do anything. We just want to come in. We'll . . . we'll forget all about this, OK?"

He went to the little bathroom and ran cold water over his bleeding hand. He had never bled so much. He opened the vanity mirror and searched around for a Band-aid. He found the box, but it was empty. For some reason, he didn't mind. He felt as if he had woken up from a good sleep. Nothing could bother him now.

He opened the bedroom door and looked at Edith and Ned and the children. They looked up at him with gaping, expectant faces but didn't move. He turned back to the cat. The body of Ralph lay, unmoving, by the bed. It didn't even shudder.

"You're out of Band-aids," Dwight said informatively. When no one said anything, he asked, "Isn't that the phone?" and laughed a little because it was truly funny: the phone was ringing and it couldn't be for him.

We were driving along the highway in a strained, overlong silence when Dan finally spoke.

"How on *earth* is anybody going to see that sign, the way it's lying in the ditch like that?"

"What sign?" I asked, slightly irritated at the way he expected me to know what he was looking at without indicating *where*. I lifted my foot from the gas and the car began to decelerate.

"Precisely my point," Dan said smugly. He pointed to the ditch on the left side of the road. There was a piece of old chipboard nailed to a stick, leaning a little to the left into a dusty rose bush. I could make out the faded lettering of the words "yard sale" handpainted in blue.

"Well, *you* saw it," I said and put my foot on the brake. I looked over at him, puzzled. When we first met, it was at a garage sale. Then we spent years scrounging around the back roads of Alberta, in search of things we didn't know we wanted yet.

Today we hadn't been looking, though. Dan shoved his shirt sleeve up and looked at his watch. "We have to be back in the city by six, Cora."

He'd been doing this for the last half hour. Looking at his watch like that. I had taken a different route back from the cabin, a secondary highway that avoided Highway 16 and its rush hour traffic altogether. The weekend was meant to be relaxing. We'd been postponing it for all of September because of our work schedules. Finally we just

left on Friday evening. We threw a few things into the cooler and drove away, without even checking the answering machine. At the lake there were children. Playing in the sand, walking with their parents. So we had that insane argument we'd been having for the past few months. Dan's response was the same as always.

"We agreed when we married, Cora. No kids. How can you go back on that?"

"Don't you think I'm different from the woman you married fifteen years ago?"

"Yeah, sure. But that doesn't mean you can change an agreement. This is a major decision we made together."

"I hear you. But I'm growing older. I'm forty. I'm changing."

"Maybe," Dan had said, slowly, cautiously, "you're too old now, Cora. Have you thought of that?"

This was, in fact, one of Dan's greatest fears. Growing older. He didn't see it though. He maintained the same fitness routine he'd always had. He could still beat his tennis partner. He was just more tired after a game. He wore the same preppy shirts his younger colleagues wore. If they recommended a restaurant, we inevitably went there within a week. And felt hopelessly out of place.

The farmyard behind the sign had the requisite stand of evergreens lining the roadside and a silver mailbox with the name "Renard" just visible on the box.

"Hey," I said lightly, hoping Dan would laugh, "what's wrong with garage sales? Look at the things we find." I could feel the excitement rising in me as I pulled into the driveway. It had been so long since we'd done this.

A mutt came running from the side of the house. He barked a few times and wagged his tail hopefully. There was a red sedan parked outside the bungalow. But no other vehicles, no people. Ahead of us was the yard sale: a few pre-mountain bike era bicycles, a washer and dryer, shelves, a fur coat, cardboard boxes on tables.

"Maybe they've gone in the for the day," Dan said. I turned off the motor. He added, "We *are* approaching the dinner hour, you know. That *sacred* time between five and seven."

Yeah, I thought. That time when you refuse to answer the phone or the door just in case it's someone asking for a donation to some worthy cause or offering to shampoo our carpets. Yeah, stay in the car if you want.

I got out, only to have the mutt slobber me with his floppy wet tongue. He bounced along beside me while I walked over to the tables.

"Cora," Dan called. He half-stood, one leg on the ground, the other still in the car. "I don't want to miss my tennis game. You always do this to me."

"Hey relax, Dan," I said. "We're always rushing to make your games. Just take five minutes. It won't *kill* you. What's this?"

Dan walked up behind me. "That's a bridle, Cora. You don't even have a horse. What are you going to do with a bridle?" He was frowning, but he probably didn't realise it.

"Buy a horse?" I teased. "Hang it over the door for good luck?" I tossed it back onto the table.

"I don't think this stuff is for sale, Cora," Dan went on. I turned and glared at him. I was getting irritated with him again. "I think it's just their *stuff*," he said. "Look how dusty it is. Some of it's been through the rain. It can't be for sale. Anyway, we can't go rooting through it like this." His voice grew distant, but he persisted, as if something he said would eventually force me to give in. He stood a few feet away, trying to keep the dog from licking his hands by holding them at chest level, his palms outward. Mr. Sterility. He stared at the sky over us. The huge and overwhelming prairie sky. Greyish clouds swirled low in the horizon. Looking away — that was his way of feigning disinterest. "It's going to rain, Cora," he said with a hint of desperation. "We should go."

"Just wait, Dan. Someone will come out in a minute. Look at this."

"But —" He watched me in silence. "Do you really think you can find anything?"

"Aren't *you* Mr. Pleasant himself," I said. "Hey, look at this spice rack. You could put all your curry spices in it. It'll be the one you don't have time to make," I added sarcastically. I don't know if I intended to say it. I immediately regretted it. There was a running joke, or at least a joke for everyone in our families, and when Dan and I heard it we gave each other a long grey fogged-over look, trying to tune it out or pretend it was meant kindly. I felt ill whenever I heard it. Neither of us had time for much, went the joke, or at least this is how our families perceived it. We had so little time we couldn't have kids. We were too busy running from one thing to another and were only in the same room together for a grand total of three point eight seconds

a day, and that was in the front entrance way where one of us put a coat on while the other took one off. You don't *even* have time for *you know*, went the joke, because no one understood our decision not to have children. My mother would then complain, "I wish you at least had time to take more pictures." She usually announced this while she looked around the house for the eight-by-ten wedding photograph she had framed for us. Dan had removed the photo one weekend when I was away. I didn't notice for ages. Probably a year. He replaced it with an antique clock that needed to be reset about once a month. "We don't look like that any more," Dan insisted when I finally asked about it, giving me a morose look. "Do we." While I thought about this, he went on, "I don't even know who those two people are."

Dan looked away, his dark eyes narrowing. He had thick eyebrows and dark brown hair and a normally placid face. Scowling didn't suit him. He loosened his shoulders, then bent his left arm stiffly in front of him, pushed his shirt sleeve up again and examined his watch. Seiko, I thought. Wide band. Gold. Twenty-four carat. Of course. When you don't have children, you have money for toys and clothes. He shoved his hands in his pockets and tapped his foot.

"Hey Dan, here's an old beret! You can wear it with your Hallowe'en costume!" I tossed it up to him and nearly overshot. He is a big man, Dan. Tall, solid. But not as tall as I sometimes thought. Funny, how easy it was to overestimate.

He caught the beret and said dryly, "I was going to throw a sheet around myself, put some wilted tomato greens on my head and go as a lazy Epicurean,

remember?" He watched me impatiently. "OK, you've had your five minutes. Let's go now, Cora."

"Stop being so *antsy*." I examined the contents of the boxes that had been shoved together on the tables. Coat hangers, yellow Hilroy notebooks, Frank Sinatra LPs, toques, the Beach Boys, *Canadian Living* and the *Western Producer*, a pair of old hockey skates, big milk cans, children's blue down coats, an electric carving knife, Tupperware. And there, a man's overcoat. Grey. Torn. As if someone had ripped it deliberately. One arm had nearly been torn off altogether. Only a few stitches at the shoulder joined it to the rest of the coat. And the inside liner had been ripped in several places. I could almost see someone doing this. I remembered the Easter Sunday I was fifteen or sixteen and my friend went ice fishing on Lake Wabamum. Her father was driving. Her kid sister sat in the back seat. They drove out onto the ice, like everybody else. The ice broke under them and their car sank, their car alone, right in the middle of the lake. My friend's dad leaned across her and pushed against the door, this was how she told it to me later, pushed and pushed because he couldn't get the door open against the force of the water. When the door opened a crack he began to push her through the opening. She had a huge bruise on her thigh, she said. When she got out of the car she couldn't find the hole in the ice made by the car. She kept hitting her head against the ice, over and over, thinking she was going to die. She was the only one who got out. Later we were standing around her garage, hanging around because neither of us knew what to do or say, and I saw a grey coat, torn all over, deliberately, like this one, only it belonged to a child. I asked my friend what happened. She said

her mother must have done it. It was her sister's. Her mother must have been mad. Or something. I knew then that I never wanted to have to go through this. I never wanted to lose a child like this, even if it meant having none at all.

I turned away from the coat with grief for the person who had done this and knowing that we shouldn't be here. I saw the sundial then. It was handmade, of clay, nearly three feet in diameter and painted with a gold glaze so shiny you could almost make out your reflection. Two herons had been etched into the clay.

"OK, I'm coming now," I called, and moved away from the table but Dan knew me well. He walked over to the table and a second later he'd picked up the sundial.

His look was intense and sharp. His eyes shone as he stared silently at the sundial.

"Hey Dan, weren't we in a hurry?" I said. "Dan. Dan. we are *not* taking this home with us, do you hear me?"

"Mm."

"Dan. We have too many things," I said harshly. "This has to stop."

"But this is a *sundial*!" Dan shouted. He said it slowly, as if I'd never seen one before. "I'll put it in our garden." His eyes grew and he began to speak more slowly and softly, till he was nearly whispering. "It doesn't rely on electricity. It doesn't need a battery. It doesn't need to be wound. It has a life of its own, Cora."

The house door opened suddenly. An elderly woman stepped outside. She was wearing slippers and an apron. She pulled her yellow sweater around herself and

moved toward us. I felt even more uncomfortable then. I looked up at her face and attempted to read it, but it was almost without emotion. It told me nothing.

"Saw the sign, did you," she said when she was closer. "Not many people do."

I almost said "I'm not surprised" but something about her manner stopped me. She had sharp, black eyes. Her hair was probably black once, too. Thick and long. Now it was short and white. She moved carefully over the gravel, looking up at us every now and again, alternately patting and shoving away the mutt. All of a sudden she stopped and said, "Oh." It was a low, flat sound. She looked straight at Dan. "You have the sundial. I don't know how it got there. It's not for sale," she said, raising her head sternly. Her eyes lit up now, so that it was hard to look at her. "My husband made it for me —"

"What?" Dan blurted. He lifted his head to look at her.

I repeated delightfully, "It's not for sale, Dan." He gave me a pained look and I frowned at him. *Don't do this*, I wanted to say.

Dan looked back at the woman and his face changed. It had the open, friendly look he used with some of his most hated colleagues. "I see this is something very valuable and means a good deal to you," he said kindly. "I am willing to offer you two hundred dollars for it."

"Dan!" I choked, then coughed to cover it up. So much for Dan the Bargain Man.

The woman didn't respond at first. Her small lips were tightly sealed. It looked as if she were actually considering his offer. Then she shook her head, several short, sharp shakes. "I said it's not for sale," she said quietly but firmly.

Dan was quick. "I don't suppose a pension is very large nowadays. It must be very difficult for you," he said softly. He looked around the yard. "Perhaps you would consider . . ." he shrugged casually, "four hundred."

"For god's sake, Dan," I said, "it's a piece of clay! We can go to the Farmer's Market and commission one —"

"Stay out of this, Cora," he said flatly. His blue eyes looked so warm and caring. I watched him closely and realised that these were the eyes of a man who would go to unimaginable lengths to get something if he wanted it badly enough. Even kill. Everything around me seemed to fade and Dan and the old woman became more acute. My whole body tightened, stunned. This side of Dan had been there in front of me all the time and I'd never noticed. I watched Dan's fingers grip the sundial and his gentle eyes move slowly, caressingly, over the woman's face. I wondered how I'd overlooked this before. Dan was the one who compromised, gave, accommodated. But he was also the one who seemed to get whatever he wanted. One evening not long before this Dan had looked up from the fat book he was reading and said, "Somerset Maugham once wrote, 'It's a funny thing about life; if you refuse to accept anything but the best, you often get it.'" Dan let this rest for a minute before he continued. "He was right about the 'often,' Cora," he said grimly and turned back to his book. I knew it tortured him, this not getting the best every time. Then I began to notice how he lay awake all night

planning how he would win his next case. Not just how he would argue it, but actually win it. It's all very logical, he would say. Even simple. All you have to do is find out what the other person really wants and how far you can lead him to that without him ever realising you've been in control all along.

I looked down at his fingers clenching the sundial. Coveting it. Such smooth, well-groomed hands. Too smooth, my Dan.

The woman looked more and more distressed. She held one hand in the other, rubbing several fingers together. She had the hands of a woman who has worked long and hard, and continued to work well after she should have begun to rest. If only she knew how afraid Dan was of her. Of growing old. And lord how futile his fear. She returned Dan's persistent gaze with her own clear black eyes and then said in a small voice that betrayed her confident eyes, "Five."

"Dan, *don't* —"

"I accept," Dan cut in. He smiled broadly and shook her hand, squeezing his large one over her small one before she had a chance to pull away. Then he looked from me to the sundial as if he was working out how to get out his wallet and pay her without having to put down the sundial. In a tight voice he barked, "Cora, pay the woman, will you, while I go start the car."

Stunned, I pulled my chequebook from my handbag. My hands shook. I could hardly write. I didn't know whose signature I scrawled at the bottom of the cheque. "I'm sorry," I said lamely. I tore off the cheque and handing it to the woman. "I don't have the cash."

The woman looked at me with large, alive eyes that seemed to waver between rage and despair. I placed a hand on her arm and she pulled back sharply. "Can I help you inside . . . is your husband —"

She shook her head. "Marcel died a while back," she said in a cold, almost mechanical voice. "That's the reason for this sale." She lifted her eyes toward the car. "He made the sundial for me the day we married. It doesn't work here, of course. It was made for another part of the world — the south of France."

I looked at her with surprise. A heaviness that I hadn't known was there lifted from my chest. The sundial was effectively useless. Lifeless, here. I held out my arm. The car horn blared obnoxiously. Dan popped his head through the window and shouted, "C'mon, Cora, we haven't got all day!"

The old woman turned away from my arm. She looked at the cheque. "Mrs. Dan Waterhouse," she said in a harsh, low voice. She crumpled the cheque into a ball and pushed it into my hand, then slowly pressed my fingers around it, one by one, so hard I had to stop myself from crying out. "Go back to your husband, Mrs. Waterhouse," she said and squeezed her lips together. She turned and walked slowly back to the house.

I fell into the passenger seat beside Dan and slammed the door. He stepped on the gas and the engine roared. The tires spun and sent a cloud of dust into the yard. For a minute neither of us spoke. I recited mentally what I wanted to say to him. Dan stared straight ahead, red-faced and shiny-eyed. My right hand still clenched the crumpled cheque.

Finally, I blurted, "Dan, why —" but he gestured with his right hand for me to stop.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said.

Neither of us spoke. The only sound was the steady murmur of the car motor. Dan drove more and more chaotically, passing vehicles on curves and up hills, turning and braking so sharply it felt like some greater being had grabbed the car with both hands and was shaking it furiously. I hated the road. I hated the sharp and jarring curves. I hated the farms and the way they reminded me of the old woman.

When we finally reached our crescent, Dan thumped his fist on the garage opener, flew past the kids pushing their way across the street on tricycles and plastic Little Tykes cars, muttering *damn kids* under his breath, and soared into the garage, slamming on the brakes at the last possible second. I screamed, thinking we would hit the garage wall. He grabbed the sundial from the back seat and stormed into the house. I got out and took the cooler from the trunk. The leftovers from our weekend away had probably gone bad by now anyway. This was our entire weekend, rotting in a plastic box. On the way to the kitchen I saw Dan standing in the middle of the garden in the pool of light. The light flooded over the pond and the giant-stone. The giant-stone. So we had christened the grey stone shaped like a large man, a giant, reclining on the lawn on its side, unchanging while the garden around it slowly transformed. Vines grew over it, trees grew taller and made wider shadows, red and yellow leaves adorned it in autumn. We put in Eden roses and double flowering cherries, almond trees and a Chinese maple. We argued over some of the trees that were already there. Dan wanted

to have the oak removed. "Look at that poplar," he said, "in five years it's grown twice as fast as the oak. Three times maybe." But I insisted on keeping the oak.

Our garden. A concession to not having a dog or kids. Or so I explained it to myself. The garden had always been a place of refuge. Over time, however, it had become Dan's garden. He planted the annuals. He moved the perennials. He trimmed, he mowed. He sat next to the giant-stone in the evenings.

Dan set the sundial on the giant-stone, about where we imagined the heart was. He stood above it, watching the shadow fall on its face.

I looked up at the hill behind the yard. The sun had just set, the moment I glanced up. Slipped smoothly behind the crown of the hill. Dan glanced at his watch, then came inside.

"You'll be late for your game," I said dryly, as if it mattered now.

"I know," he said quietly.

That is how we were when we were angry. Our bodies became stiff and we couldn't say much. It wasn't that we hated each other. We were simply terrified of what we would say if we let ourselves. We had let so many little things slip past and simmer inside us so that after a while just thinking of them made us irrationally angry. If we brought up the new little things, we'd have to bring up all the little things.

After he left I moved slowly around the house and slid my finger over the digital clock faces, temporarily blanking out a portion of the time. I moved through the house a second time, resetting the clocks so that each one told a different time. Like the sundial, which would never be accurate. Now it was 1:00 a.m. or 4:15 p.m. in the

kitchen, depending where you looked. Now you could leave the hall bathroom at 1:40 p.m., and it was only 12:15 p.m. in the bedroom. Now it was 2:31 a.m. according to the VCR, 13:24 on the coffee pot, 3:44 a.m. on the stereo, 21:02:33 on the microwave. Now alarm radios, telephone display, computer, house alarm, all told you a different time. I began to laugh hysterically.

I stopped laughing abruptly. I remembered that normally when I was home in the evening I stepped outside to the garden, wandered around the giant-stone, sat on the stone bench, and had words with the giant-stone in my own way. But the sundial had turned the garden into something morbid. I remembered Dan's words: *Maybe you're too old now*. I felt the old woman's strong fingers closing over mine. She was out in the garden, too, standing with the crumpled cheque.

Dan came home late. I was already in bed, asleep. I woke to him snuggling in close beside me, to my body twisted in the sheets and duvet. Then I felt warm breathing close to my neck, strong fingers moving over my head, lips pressing against the side of my face and my neck. His apology, I thought, and opened my eyes to see him. He opened his eyes then too and glanced over my head at the digital clock by the bed. He stopped moving and began to laugh lightly. His hands became soft and lifeless, and he pulled away, lying with his back to me.

In the morning, I moved in and out of sleep. Sounds of the shower, of water running in the sink, of loud, short bursts of laughter from the kitchen, of Dan's steps on the back porch, floated into my half-waking dreams. Then I slept, deeply. Those morning

sounds had become so much a part of me, I didn't know later whether I'd simply dreamt all of them.

The first snow came shortly after that, so there was no need to tend to the garden. Spring came. Vines continued to grow over the giant-stone. Before long the stone was smothered. From the kitchen window I could see the sundial sitting on the giant-stone's heart, the sun's shadow casting some time that was closer to Dan's time than my own. Dan was already gone then. The postcard had said very little. There were the seemingly endless beach and palm trees. That colourful, glossy image of eternal bliss, frozen in time. Sent from the site of an international conference he had been attending. His messy scrawl was barely legible. There was something about a young woman. She had become pregnant. How could he possibly leave her? You are a woman, Cora, the postcard said. Surely you understand.

On a Monday night before seven I ordered a BLT sandwich. I was at Earl's Restaurant, where parrots red and yellow and blue perched overhead and luscious green palms surrounded the tables, offering the illusion of privacy. Mr. Richards asked for a spinach salad with extra almonds. Mr. Richards and I ate quickly. We hurried. We were late. It was nearly seven o'clock and at seven I would begin telephoning Red Cross blood donors: I was a telephone volunteer.

Every Monday night at seven I sat down in a spiderleg network of phone tables encased in soundproof glass and spoke into a piece of cream-coloured plastic, asking strangers for their blood. I and three other volunteers from Mr. Richards' high school chemistry class. The telephone was jammed tightly between my ear and my shoulder. My hands were free to book appointments and leaf through pages of blood donors' telephone numbers and draw spindly trees and wide-petalled flowers in the margins. The next day, the next week, though I held my head upright and stood tall, I felt the hard plastic squeezed unnaturally against my ear.

The first evening we began volunteering, Mr. Richards drove us four to the Red Cross in his dark green Buick. He unlocked the back door and took us on a tour of the building.

"The donors," he explained, then paused to smile, "go in the main door and check in *here*." He gestured toward a brown book with names and license plate numbers. Except for this first evening, Mr. Richards said very little. Normally, he

pointed, he gestured with his hands, he moved his head or eyes. "Always identify yourself when you come here during the day," he went on. "Always let people know who you are and what your intentions are. If you drive a Porsche, for instance, make sure you let people know so you get faster service." He smiled, watching for us to laugh at his joke. We finally laughed lightly, because we felt we had to. We were all in the eleventh grade. None of us had a car.

Mr. Richards was a large man. He was nearly fifty, I guessed, and starting to lose the hair down the middle of his head. He spoke quietly, so that we had to stand close and strain to listen. He listened with similar silence when his students had something to say. His mouth seemed a permanent warm smile. His blue eyes always shone, even danced.

We four followed Mr. Richards past the donor beds, the rest area, and the plasmapheresis beds with their tiny television sets attached to long robot-like arms. We stopped at the donor-volunteer coffee corner where cookies and soft drinks and coffee had been left for us. At this time of night, the blood machines had been shut down for the day and the beds were empty. Not a soul was in sight.

"Help yourself," Mr. Richards said, nodding toward the Voortman's cookies and pouring himself coffee in a styrofoam cup.

I have never liked the taste of Voortman's cookies.

"Always be polite," Mr. Richards reminded us the first night. "Never push. Be friendly. Joke if you're comfortable. Tell them" — he paused slightly, letting the words come slowly — "you're a vampire. You want to suck their blood. That often gets a good reaction." His lips widened into a big smile.

Mr. Richards did not telephone donors. He sat, ready to answer our questions and to deal with difficult calls, at his desk outside the phone tables and watched us through the glass window. I didn't like this arrangement. I told myself, each week, that he didn't like it either. He couldn't possibly. He told me, when I asked, that the glass was there because there were too many distractions during the day. The day-time telephone volunteers couldn't do their job. I could picture the day-time women, before the glass was there, sitting with their backs to the room and feeling unidentifiable gestures flutter past their heads and shoulders.

We knew from the tour where people gave blood, where we could have a cookie break, and where we telephoned. Everything had a place. But the building is very large. There are other rooms.

Six o'clock one Monday night Mr. Richards took Lisa and me for dinner at Earl's. Earl's, with the bright, cheerful parrots hanging from the ceiling. The enormous green plants surrounding the table and creating the illusion of intimacy.

Lisa and I had done some extra volunteer work on the weekend. We'd been hostesses at a satellite clinic in Castledowns Mall. And now, Mr. Richards was taking us out for dinner. A treat, because we never went out for dinner with our families. My

kid brother was three and still threw food off his plate when he didn't like it and screamed in public places and hadn't learned how to sit still until the adults were finished. Lisa and I ordered Earl Burgers with fries and talked about telephoning. My fingers reached up to my sore neck.

"You never know," Mr. Richards said. His full lips spread into a warm smile. "One day one of you might be a nurse and take people's blood."

"Yuck!" Lisa and I said in one breath.

There is a room at the back where the cookies are stored.

Six o'clock one Monday night Mr. Richards took Lisa and me for dinner at Earl's. The parrots squawked. The palms swayed gently in the breezes. We were quite sure later, Lisa and I, that we were somewhere warm. Somewhere exotic. Anywhere else but *here*.

"So, how do you like being vampires?" Mr. Richards asked matter-of-factly. The palm of my hand rested against my neck and I thought I had slept on it wrong. I thought I had twisted it in the night.

Lisa laughed. She said, "It's kinda fun."

Mr. Richards taught chemistry in high school. He recruited volunteers.

There is a room at the back where volunteers don't go.

On a Monday night at six o'clock Mr. Richards took me to Earl's and after we sat down behind the monstrous green palms, he said, "I'm afraid your friend Lisa can't make it after all. She's sick."

There is a room at the back where volunteers never go. Not a huge room, but a room like a closet. Small. Dark. In this room you can find boxes and boxes of Voortman's cookies. Chocolate chip. Oatmeal. Raisin. Sugar. Shortbread. Peanut butter. Nowhere are there so many cookies you don't want to eat.

Six o'clock one Monday night Mr. Richards and I went for dinner at Earl's where parrots mimic curious words and palms, because there is a breeze perhaps, gently brush up against a bruised neck.

I ordered a BLT sandwich. Mr. Richards ordered a spinach salad. With extra almonds. He asked me how I was doing in Math. He asked me how my younger brother Corey was. He asked me if I was getting anything out of volunteering. Yes, I said, yes, and moved my fingers self-consciously to my neck. I thought it must be so red and large now that everybody could see.

No. That day Mr. Richards didn't ask about home, or school, or telephoning. Because if he had, I would have said I didn't even want to be a volunteer any more.

Voortman's cookies are hard and dry.

Six o'clock one Monday night Mr. Richards and I sat down among the palms. I ordered a BLT sandwich. He ordered a spinach salad.

"And what are your summer plans?" he asked when our meal finally arrived.

"Working at the Dairy Queen."

Without looking up from his spinach he asked, "Will that interfere with your volunteering?" His voice was gentle but the words came like padded bullets, soft and quick. I stopped chewing and looked over at him. I shook my head. His blue eyes wandered across my face. They looked sad suddenly. It was a strange sadness, because he was always so happy. "There's something you're not telling me," he said. My mouth opened to speak, but he was quicker. "You've always told me everything," he said, and I knew, by the way he said it, that I hadn't, of course I hadn't. "Talk to me," he whispered. His eyes were deep and sunken, as if he hadn't slept for days and days. His eyes seemed to say, if you just talk to me, everything will be all right again.

I didn't eat the Voortman's cookies during our breaks.

Doug Richards telephones one Christmas to wish me a happy day. Happy Day. It's a Monday. He tells me he's a grandfather now. Outside my window the sun is setting. I am no longer a telephone volunteer. No longer a volunteer at all. I move the plastic phone from my right ear to my left. A sharpness, like a long hard wire running along my veins, shoots through my neck, reminding me of months or years of forcing a phone to sit where a phone wasn't made to go.

"Don't you want to know," Doug asks, having somehow became Doug after I finished high school, "if it's a boy or a girl?"

Voortman's cookies leave a vile aftertaste on your tongue.

My BLT sandwich was so thick a toothpick held it together.

"What haven't I told you about?" I was exasperated more with his apparent sadness than anything else.

"Why, you've never told me about your boyfriend," he said calmly. His voice was so soft I almost didn't hear it.

"What?" I laughed, choking on a piece of bacon. I looked at his soft, warm, quiet face to see if he was joking. He was smiling again. His eyes had a light in them. But he wasn't joking.

"You know I take an active interest in my students," he went on in his slow, quiet way. "In young people." His voice was almost inaudible now but it seemed to me that the couple at the next table over could hear him, through the palms, and even the couple beyond them. I stared over at the farther couple, wondering what sounds were coming from the vague, animated movements of their lips.

"Tell me, how do you do it?" he asked matter-of-factly.

A BLT sandwich is a sandwich that's toasted and at Earl's that Monday night the toaster made toast so crisp it grated at the inside of my mouth and the bacon, it was practically raw.

"What's it like?"

"Bastard," I thought. The thought was so far in the back of my head I didn't even hear it. But overhead there were blue and red and yellow parrots and they heard it. They picked up the word and tossed it from one to the other, croaking it again and again, their hoarse cries sliding down the broad leaves of the palms and floating up again. They repeated it in different ways, louder and softer, faster and slower, like a small child who has just learned a new word and needs to announce it to everything, to everyone, it sees. I sat unable to move, watching for the waitress to arrive with the bill, watching Mr. Richards eat his salad, staring down at the mess of bacon and lettuce and tomato and dried toast on my plate and wondering when we would go, when I would return to my seat behind the soundproof glass and begin to breathe again, unheard.

There is a room at the back where you don't volunteer to go.

Six o'clock one Monday night Mr. Richards and I went for dinner where the parrots mimic the oddest things and the palms know both the force of unspeakable gusts of wind and the soundless tail-end of a whisper. We ate quickly so we wouldn't be late for telephoning. We ate so quickly we didn't have a chance to speak at all and in fact I barely stopped to breathe. Mr. Richards wrapped his hands around his Clubhouse sandwich, large hands that were soft and warm and fleshy against the skin, and we had so little time he didn't say anything at all but his lips didn't stop moving. Not once.

This wasn't true of course. Even the parrots will tell you he ate a spinach salad that day.

At the far end of the cookie room is a shelf just high enough for a person of average height to stand flush against the wall so the top of her head just reaches the shelf, snug.

Six-thirty and Mr. Richards was moving too slowly, his mouth forming words that even the parrots didn't mimic.

"Come on now," Mr. Richards prodded. "What, don't you trust me?"

When bacon is half raw it gets stuck in your throat and on your tongue and sits there so you can barely speak. Mayonnaise, when it is soft, runs down your hands and sometimes you don't have a napkin to wipe it. You think about wiping your hands on your jeans but that would leave a stain.

"You *are* enjoying yourself at any rate." His eyes narrowed slightly as he waited for me to ponder this. "Aren't you?"

I moved my head to one side. When you are having a hard time breathing, you want to save your breath so you don't speak at all.

"These things are important."

"*Bastard*," said one parrot and then another. My eyes darted around his face, everywhere but his glassy blue eyes so he couldn't see into mine.

"Aren't they?"

When bacon turns cold and the toast crumbles, a BLT is not an appealing dinner.

There is a room at the back where nobody goes. A person who is not very tall can stand under the low metal shelf and when she pushes her head against it, stretching herself high, she thinks if she pushes any harder her neck might break. The shelf is firm and like all things firm, it holds or it breaks.

"We have to hurry," he said, to remind me. Then, as an afterthought, he added, "my treat."

The sound leapt from my throat on its own, an involuntary utterance, a hoarse cry, and soared freely over three goldfish lying calmly on the brown carpet below the fishbowl.

It was a Monday night sometime after six o'clock. My body hung from the ceiling, hovered over a jumble of elusive green palms. The fish were not breathing. The only sound came from the television set in the next room where my brother Corey's babysitter sat on the couch, her feet on the coffee table. Then I heard a small wail from under the dining room table behind me.

I knelt on the carpet and stared at the fish. Fascinated. When the carpet is moist under three goldfish you know they have not been there long but you never know exactly how long a fish lies dying. Gasping and gulping for air.

From behind me came a sputter. "I-I-I-I —" and Corey stopped, waiting for the words, for new breath. Corey was still short enough that he could just stand under the table. The top of his head grazed the underside. His cheeks were bright red, his wet lips parted into a tiny "O." His shiny red-brown eyes were fixed on the dead fish. He came forward and kicked at the fish with one foot and began to shout angrily, "Dumb dumb dumb —" and then he stopped again, staring, gasping.

He didn't know I had only one word and it had been taken by the parrots. They'd snatched it away and tossed it from one to the other all around the restaurant. I sought out other words, words like *fish* and *water*, but they got stuck in my throat, wedged in with dry toast and raw bacon and a hoarse squawk, and I could only stare at Corey, the way you stare at a sandwich that is not what you ordered and you do not have time to wait for a new one.

Why did they do this, Corey wanted to know. He stared in confusion at his chubby fists. He only wanted to play with them, he insisted, and then he began to gasp, to hold his breath and puff out his cheeks, in imitation of the fish.

I wondered how long the fish had been lying there, unable to breathe and making no sound at all. I watched Corey throw himself on the carpet and flop onto his back. His lips quivered as he tried not to cry. His face turned redder and his cheeks bulged as he held his breath. Then he let out the air with a gasp and began to howl, louder and louder. His small body shook, his face twisted into a bright red wail, streaked and bulging like a fish's belly. I hovered quietly above him, willing him with all my might not to stop. Not yet, you've only just begun.

I felt it then, in my chest. It was as if a hand were pushing against it, hard. I gathered the soft fish in my palm and slowly lowered my cupped hand into the fish water. And held it there. Beside my ear came the excited flutter of so many wings. Then, over and over, louder than the cries surging from Corey's tiny body, the harsh, grating shriek of one hard word.

The first time she tried on the dress, Emma felt like dancing. She pulled aside the green velvet curtain and glided over to the oval mirror next to the hat stand. Her bare feet moved soundlessly over the hardwood floor. The skirt lifted gently away from her legs. Emma imagined a warm breeze, somewhere, blowing the cool rayon around her legs. She felt different somehow. Lighter. Her eyes moved slowly over her reflection. It was as if she were seeing her body for the first time. Her eyes grew larger and she smiled. The dress was burgundy, with hundreds of tiny white flowers. It came in snugly, but not too snugly, at the waist, and fell loosely to her calves. A row of tiny buttons was sewn on from just above her breasts to a high, slightly ruffled collar. She stared at herself in awe. She was a woman. And no one had told her. She slid her hands along her hips. The dress felt new, though it was second hand. She wondered who had worn it before. And why she had given it away. Emma could not imagine ever giving this dress away. In fact, it suited her so well, it could only ever have been hers.

With both hands she gathered her hair. She had long, straight, nearly black hair, not cut in any particular style. Every day she wore it down. Sometimes it hung in her face, sometimes it fell down her back. Now, she pulled her hair up over her head, letting a few loose strands fall down her neck. She closed her eyes and saw herself wearing the dress to a garden party outside a mansion. Then, she was in a wheat field before harvest. The sun was setting. Everything was a shiny yellow-gold.

Emma felt the price tag poking into her neck. She opened her eyes and strained her neck to read it. Forty-two dollars plus GST. She dropped her hair and turned away from the mirror. She had no money. So, she said silently, it doesn't matter. I have nowhere to wear the dress. And it's September anyway. Summer is over, here in Edmonton.

"It's closing time, miss," came a cheerful voice. Emma turned abruptly. There was the shop owner, going through her hand-written receipts at her cash desk. She watched Emma's face. Perhaps she expected her to say she'd wear the dress home, thanks, and carry her jeans in a bag.

"My bus! I have to go!" Emma said breathlessly. She stumbled into the change room and gently peeled the dress off her body. It fit so perfectly, it felt like she was losing a layer of skin. She pulled her t-shirt over her old jeans, letting the shirt hang over them. Then she approached the shop owner, carrying the dress with great care, as if it were as fragile as the thin porcelain tea cups or the wedding crystal her mother kept locked in the china cabinet and never used. If she could take this dress home, she would put it on every day.

"I'm sorry, I'll come back tomorrow," she said quickly, setting the dress on the cash desk without meeting the woman's eyes. She ran outside to 124th Street, holding her head down and blushing. She had no money. She didn't have a job. She had no idea how she would find the money for the dress. Sometimes she babysat. Not as much as she did once, though. People said she bored the younger kids. And couldn't control the older ones. Only Mary Bain would hire her. Emma knew it was because no one

else would work for her. Mary Bain was a receptionist at the AMA on Kingsway and had two kids. She always ran out of money by the middle of the month and couldn't pay. She told Emma she kept track. She would pay when she got back on her feet.

From now on, Emma decided, she would make Mary pay her. She added up how long it would take to earn enough money to buy the dress. Fourteen hours, at three dollars an hour. The time would add up fast, Emma thought. Before long, she would have the dress.

The Number 5 bus took Emma to Westmount. From there she walked the three blocks home. The brown bungalow stared back at her, screaming decorum and respectfulness. And whispering a dull restlessness, barely audible at first, but slowly growing louder, especially at night when houses are meant to be quiet.

Emma stepped inside and walked down the hall to the kitchen. Her mother turned from the stove and said calmly, "So?"

"There are no jobs, OK?"

"Again nothing," the older woman said in a hard voice. She watched Emma thoughtfully. "I know this is difficult. But somehow I don't think you're really looking. You should have had *something* by now —"

"I'll try again tomorrow," Emma interrupted. She looked away from her mother.

Yesterday evening, her mother was different. She called Emma into the living room. "Your father left you something before he went to work." She was standing by the china cabinet, in front of the tea set and the wedding crystal she never used.

Emma's eyes wandered over the sharply cut crystal. She could almost feel the weight of the glass.

Her mother reached into her grey cardigan and took out a small piece of paper. Emma held out her hand, and her mother pulled away. "It's a bus pass. For a month." She watched Emma carefully. "It was expensive. Don't lose it." She slapped the pass into Emma's hand. When Emma saw the month, glaring up at her in a bold red, she was reminded that this was now the second September since she had finished high school. And still she had not found a job. She took the pass gratefully. She never had one before. Now, she could go anywhere. She stared down at the pass, thrilled at the thought of how it would take her away.

"Eighy receipts issued in one hour today," Emma's mother was saying now. She turned back to the stove. "That's a record." Emma's mother worked as an accountant for the Alberta Lung Association. She could tell you how many Canadians had died of second-hand cigarette smoke in any given year. She also volunteered for the Church of God down the street, welcoming newcomers. The children who had just arrived from Wales were having trouble adjusting. "Perhaps you could meet them, Emma, you could do *something* valuable with your time . . ." Emma began to count the tiny buttons on her dress, slowly, from the bottom up, each number bringing her farther away. "You *are* going to be just like your sister Vanessa," her mother said suddenly. "I can see it in your face already."

"See what?" Emma's eyes flashed brightly at her mother.

"You look different." Her mother watched her again in silence. Emma's father's words rang through Emma's head. *And to think she has been living in my house!* Since that day, four years ago last April, they had rarely mentioned Emma's sister. Her mother had removed the photographs of Vanessa from the china cabinet and carefully rearranged the others to fill the gaps. She had torn the pictures from the albums, even the ones with Emma, and filled in the empty spaces with other photographs.

"Don't talk to me about Vanessa," Emma said slowly. She didn't sound angry, or bothered. She was simply weary.

"You think we wanted her to leave?" Emma's mother persisted.

Emma went over the fragments of the last fight about Vanessa. Her father shouting *Just gave her that dress, too* after he grabbed her by the sleeve and the dress tore. *And this is how she thanks me.* And now, Vanessa was in Vancouver. Or so her mother said. Lately Emma had begun to doubt this. She imagined Vanessa was in Edmonton, pounding the streets every day. Searching, and being turned away. Like Emma.

Emma didn't answer her mother. She was beginning to understand.

That night she lay in bed, her eyes reading the map of the city in her mind. She followed the route she took looking for work. It was always the same: West Edmonton Mall. Then Edmonton Centre. Eaton Centre. Jasper Avenue. Kingsway. Heritage Mall, if it wasn't too late. And if she still had the energy. Somewhere she would see a "Help Wanted — No Experience Necessary" sign in a window and she would go inside. The

shop owner or a clerk would look up with a smile. Until Emma said she had come about the job. She didn't stammer or shake as much now. Sometimes she thought it was because she didn't care, she had given up. Still, the clerk's face would become smooth as his smile faded. He would shake his head. We need somebody older, miss, he would inevitably say. Somebody different, she knew he was thinking. Somebody prettier.

Once, she had been asked to come to an interview, before the manager had actually seen her. She had filled out an application form. She went to the restaurant around quarter past ten in the morning, before it opened for lunch. Low hanging lamps hung close to the tables, giving off only a little light. All the tables were in booths and the seats were covered in a dark red velvet. A waitress met Emma at the door and led her to a table. Her high heels clicked faintly on the carpet. Emma saw that all the waitresses were dressed in the same way, in very short black skirts and low-cut silky white blouses. They all wore bright red lipstick, and two or three shades of eye shadow. Her father's voice came to her then. *She can go to Vancouver for all I care. I just don't want to see her like that.* Emma wondered what exactly he had seen the morning he stepped out of the back of the law courts downtown. He worked nights, overseeing janitors, and got off work around five-thirty or six in the morning. Was it a skirt cut too low, or a blouse? Or too much red lipstick? But how much was too much?

Eventually the restaurant manager arrived. He slid into the seat opposite her. Emma's eyes jumped nervously from the too-golden, tanning studio colour on his hands and face and nearly balding head to his mauve-coloured silk shirt and the huge rings on his fingers. She stared at his full lips when he spoke. Could she work late?

Was she uh . . . he moved his large hands in the air and his eyes began to roam over Emma's face and down to her chest . . . flexible? Emma could feel the heat in her cheeks, in her forehead even. She hadn't prepared herself for these questions. So she answered slowly, telling him what she thought he wanted to hear. The man excused himself then and walked slowly and soundlessly to the other side of the restaurant, looking neither to the left nor to the right but always straight ahead and high above the tops of the little booths. He disappeared behind a dark green padded door. Emma watched the door patiently, waiting for him to return, for him to say something. She watched the waitresses moving from one table to the next, preparing them for their first customers. Finally, the one who had shown Emma to the table walked up to her and said it looked like they didn't need anyone after all. She led Emma silently to the door.

Tonight, Emma turned her thoughts away from the interview and the "Help Wanted" signs. She followed the city map only as far as Jasper Avenue and got off at 124th Street in front of the dress shop. Tomorrow, she wouldn't look for a job. Tomorrow, she would return to the dress shop and try on the dress again. She would dance across the hardwood floor over to the mirror and twirl around the hat stand. She lay awake for an hour, bursting with the same excitement she had felt when she held the September bus pass for the first time, and watched herself dance across the ceiling through a field of tiny, nameless white flowers.

On the bus to the dress shop, Emma calculated her babysitting hours again. Mary Bain still had not called her to babysit, but Emma was confident she would soon. When she

got off the bus, she moved slowly toward the shop. She was beginning to think it was all a mistake. She was still just plain Emma in the dress. The girl who lived in the little brown house. Quiet and modest. Not the woman she had seen.

She arrived at the door just as the shop was opening. She pushed the door open hesitantly. The shop owner looked up from a rack of skirts and said cheerfully, "Good morning, come back for the dress, have you? I've hung it back with the others against the wall there, dear."

Emma touched the material gingerly, as if it would come apart or disintegrate in her fingers. She took the dress into the little room behind the green curtain and slipped out of her clothes. Even before she had pulled the zipper all the way up the back, she felt the lightness in her arms and legs. She came out of the room and walked lightly over to the mirror. Before she could think about what she was doing, she had pulled her hair up over her head, curled it into a bun and pinned it in place with one of Vanessa's large hair pins. Yes. She liked it like this. The round tan hat with the curves, she thought, *that* is the hat for this dress. Emma lifted the hat from the hook and set in on her head. Her cheeks turned pink. Her lips spread into a small smile and she almost laughed out loud. She closed her eyes and took herself outside to a lush garden that extended beyond an enormous house. Then, to a lake. A deserted, sandy beach. A field just before harvest. The breeze blew the soft rayon between her legs and lifted strands of hair away from her face. The Someone who was there waiting for her was approaching from behind.

"That's a lovely dress," the shop owner said. She had left the cash desk to rearrange a row of slacks and now stood looking at Emma from the side.

Emma opened her eyes in alarm and sucked in her breath. Then she turned and said quickly, "I'll have to come back tomorrow. To pay for it." She didn't know why she said that. She wouldn't have forty-two dollars tomorrow either.

Feeling heavy and shabby in her old jeans, Emma stepped on a bus that took her north on 124th Street and got off near the Municipal Airport. She sat on the bus stop bench watching planes fly in and take off. She had never done this before. Normally she would have thought she was crazy. She could hear her father say, *Why would you go and do that for? What a waste of time!* But she sent his words away with an old grey jumbo jet and imagined the dress flowing over her legs. It dawned on her as she stared at the planes that a person could wear the dress anywhere but here.

She took the next bus that came her way and opened her fingers to the driver. The pass was already beginning to curl to the shape of her palm. After the driver nodded down at her hand, she closed her fingers over the pass and took a seat near the door. The bus took her to the Coliseum, where she had never been. From there she took a bus through Londonderry, and then Castledowns, and then straight south as far as she could go. She traced her finger over the routes marked in black and red in the Ride Guide. A person could go somewhere new every day and travel hundreds of miles.

When Emma arrived home in the evening, her mother said dryly, "I guess you didn't find anything today." She looked at Emma, waiting for her response. "You've

put your hair up." She followed Emma into the kitchen. "Yes. You are getting to be more like Vanessa every day. I don't like this. I don't like this at all." Her voice had a hardness to it.

Emma remembered her hair then. She felt naked suddenly. She felt her mother's eyes move slowly over her exposed, cold neck and the loose strands of hair. She put her hand on the back of her neck, her fingers pushing the hair pin tightly in place.

Her mother shook her head. "Vanessa," she said softly, clicking her tongue against her front teeth.

"Stop it!" Emma shouted angrily. She straightened her face, surprised. She had come to feel indifferent toward her mother, confused by her strangeness about Vanessa. Her mother never had anything to say when her father flew into rages about Emma's sister. She could only respond by looking around the kitchen and telling him whom she had welcomed into Canada that day or how many Albertans had been diagnosed with lung cancer in the past six months. And how lucky they were, how lucky to have a home and a family and not to live in exile, how lucky they were that no one had cancer — *and how lucky to have a daughter like Vanessa!* Emma's father would shout, and her mother would go silent.

"Mary Bain called," her mother said then, in a quiet voice.

"Mary Bain!" Emma cried, walking quickly to the telephone. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you know she won't pay you." Her mother sighed. "She spends all her money on cigarettes and candy. No wonder she's so plump," she muttered.

"She'll pay. I'll make her."

A few hours later Emma sat reading to Mary's children. Even as her lips moved over the words in the story, she was adding up in her mind how much she was earning. As soon as the children were in bed, she stood in the living room and imagined Mary standing opposite her. She practised telling Mary that she wanted to be paid *now*, not later, that Mary could get some money from the man who was outside waiting till Emma left before coming in. Emma knew he would be there; there was always someone there, on the street, the car lights off and the engine still running. Emma always looked the men straight in the eye as she approached from the house and crossed in front of the car on the way to her yard. The men looked away, pretending she wasn't there. Emma imagined fixing her eyes firmly on Mary's the same way. She rehearsed out loud the words she would say to her, trying to sound serious and angry. Then she turned to the window to watch for Mary. She thought about looking through Mary's house for money. It was owed to her, after all.

Eventually she began to fall asleep. She was dozing when Mary arrived. She stumbled sleepily toward the front door. Mary was looking down at the children's shoes on the floor. Emma couldn't see her eyes, but she knew Mary was crying.

Mary wiped her eyes. "Sorry." She smiled and the tears streamed down past her cheeks. "The brute just dumped me. I've had enough of men, let me tell you." She opened her wallet. Emma saw that it was empty except for a worn two-dollar bill.

Emma was close enough now to smell cigarette smoke on Mary's hair and jacket. And beer, when Mary spoke. "I guess I can't pay you. I'll pay you at the end of the month, I promise." She held the door open for Emma. Emma saw that there was no car in the street this time. She looked back into Mary's watery eyes and tried to remember what she had planned to say. But none of it came back. She stumbled into the cool air, wishing she was going anywhere but home.

Emma shut out Mary Bain the way she shut out her old city map. In the morning she continued with her new routine, riding the busses first, and arrived at the dress shop late in the day. She took the bus down to 118th Avenue, and east along Kingsway. She sat for half an hour or an hour or longer watching the planes take off. Then she hopped on the first bus that came, whether it went east or west. She rode the buses all day, closing her eyes and seeing herself in the dress. She put off the pleasure of wearing the dress until the last possible moment. Until it almost hurt not to be in it, not to hold the smooth fabric in her fingers.

One afternoon, the shop owner asked, "Would you like me to put the dress aside for you? I have an instalment plan."

Emma didn't know what this involved. She didn't want to be in debt. She could hear her mother reminding her father in a despairing tone about the bills they still hadn't paid. And her mother demanding *How can you buy a dress for one and not the other?* She shook her head quickly and said no, no, she would come back.

Very soon she had ridden almost every bus route. Now, she began to repeat her favourites. She went regularly along Ada Boulevard and Saskatchewan Drive, where the houses were set well back from the street and the lawns were vast and green and flowers still bloomed in the gardens. Even more than that, she liked going past the high-walled neighbourhoods in Riverbend and the hidden streets around Aspen Gardens and Blue Quill. She couldn't see over the walls or all the way down the streets, but she knew the houses were all mansions and the back gardens, small forests. She knew there were many grand palaces the buses didn't go anywhere near. She knew they all had china and crystal like the ones in her mother's china cabinet and these were used for tea and wine every day, not once, not twice, but ten times. She began to yearn for these houses as she yearned for the dress. One small glimpse into that world, that was all she wanted.

One afternoon during the last week of September the shop owner offered Emma a green cardigan. Emma had been twirling the skirt around her legs. She stopped abruptly and looked at the shop owner.

"A client brought this by with some other clothing. I'm sure I couldn't sell it for much. Why don't you take it?"

Emma looked at it. Her fingers moved forward to feel the finely knit mohair. She wanted it. Like an automaton, reciting what she had been taught, she shook her head vehemently, pulling her fingers away before touching the soft wool. "No. Thank you." Her voice nearly broke. She was more frightened now than angry. Vanessa had

come home with new shoes and new jeans and no explanation of how she got them. It was the beginning of everything going wrong with her.

Lying in bed that night, she slid her left thumb slowly across the tips of her fingers. She could almost feel the loose strands of mohair that had brushed against her fingers when she pulled away. She wanted the sweater so badly.

It was September 30th. Saturday. She had forgotten, as the days ran together, that the bus pass would eventually expire. That this would bring the end of her freedom. She was acutely aware that she had travelled so many miles, but had stepped no farther into the world than she was a month ago. Only the dress could bring her from this month to the next, could remind her of the way she looked with her hair up, a woman now.

Emma thought about her route carefully. She took the Number 37 to the University, and the 69 past Southgate to Millwoods. Her pass was completely crinkled now. It was beginning to tear at the corners. The deep imprint of a red September was fading. Yet Emma closed her eyes and felt the rayon down her back, along her waist, over her legs. She touched the row of little buttons running up to the snug neck. She felt the pull of her hair in its tight bun over her head and the loose curls tickling the back of her neck. She began to dance across a long green lawn. The one she liked on Ada Boulevard. Then she imagined one behind a high stone wall in Riverbend. She plucked a bright orange nasturtium and a late-blooming yellow poppy from a flower garden. The nameless Someone who was there, who was supposed to be there, slipped the blossom behind her ear. He handed her a crystal goblet filled with red wine. They

watched the yellow autumn leaves blow across the dress, making a pattern against the white flowers. She danced and twirled barefoot in the soft grass and the dry leaves as the cool rayon slid sensuously across her thighs, stroked and tickled her calves.

FOUR O'CLOCK. The loud, stiff voice came through the transit radio. Already, Emma thought, and sat up straight, staring at the passengers in surprise. The clothing shop closed at five. Emma had no idea where she was. She ran to the driver in a panic and asked him how to get back to 124th Street. He let her off at the barren bus terminal at Heritage Mall. A cold wind blew dust swirls across the huge, deserted parking lot. Emma stood surrounded by grey pavement and a greyer prairie sky, one that seemed to close in on her with an overbearing heaviness. Finally, a bus arrived and brought her downtown. Emma waited on Jasper Avenue, anxiously watching the large hands on the clock above Macaulay Plaza. When the bus finally came, she jumped on, screaming, "I have to get to the dress shop. *Hurry*!"

The driver laughed. "That may be, but I need to see your fare."

Emma looked down at her hand. The bus pass she had been clutching all day was gone. "I had a pass," she began. She felt immensely tired, as if she had just woken up from a restless sleep. She wondered whether she had simply imagined the bus pass. "I had one . . ." She wanted to describe to him the bold red print and the way the pass fit so well in her palm. She wanted to tell him how thrilled she had felt when she first saw it, new and red and shiny, and how it meant she could go anywhere. If only she didn't feel so tired and old. She wanted, most of all, to tell him she'd been away for a long time, but she was back now.

The driver laughed again. "Hey, this is my last run. I'm in a good mood. How far are you going?" Emma told him, and he said, "Sit down. I'll take you. I can't handle anyone crying on my bus."

Emma collapsed into the seat nearest the door. The bus crawled. It stopped at every light and on every block while people carrying groceries and small children got on and off, all of them moving too slowly. Hurry, hurry, Emma repeated to herself. She hated them, all of them. The sky, which had been grey but still light at Heritage Mall, was slowly growing darker. It must be five o'clock. Or later.

Finally, the bus pulled up at the stop opposite the clothing shop. Emma ran out. The lights were still on. The shop was still open. She could see the shop owner sitting behind her cash desk going through her receipts. Emma remembered seeing her in exactly this way the afternoon she first tried on the dress. The woman sat in the light of a table lamp, two fingers holding a pencil, her middle finger punching numbers in a calculator. Emma moved slowly now. She had not worked out how she was going to buy the dress.

She stepped up to the door and was about to push it open when she saw a heavy woman pull aside the green curtain. The woman stepped clumsily out of the change room in a brownish dress. She caught Emma's eye because she was much too big for the dress. It bulged at the waist and hips. It stretched at the shoulders. The woman was so short, the edges of the dress dragged along the floor. The dress looked so odd, Emma didn't realise at first that it was hers. Her eyes moved slowly up to the woman's

face. Mary Bain. In Emma's dress. She had no idea how to step in the dress. She had no idea how it made you dance.

Mary smiled at herself in the mirror. She pulled a blue hat off the hat stand and set it on her head. No, Emma thought, frowning, the colour is wrong. The hat is wrong. Mary walked back to the change room. The curtain swayed in and out as she manoeuvred her way out of the dress. Then she reemerged with Emma's dress flung casually over her arm. The blue hat was still on her head, the price tag dangling stupidly down the side. She lumbered over to the shop owner and dropped the dress on the cash desk. She pulled her wallet from her large handbag and tossed three new twenty-dollar bills on the desk.

Emma turned to the shop owner then. The woman glanced back at Emma, held her eyes for a split second, and then turned her attention back to her customer. Her face was smooth and unsmiling, like those of the shop owners who explained to Emma that they were looking for somebody else. Emma remembered her hand then, held up toward the door. She pushed hard on the handle, walked quickly over to the hat stand, and lifted the tan hat from its hook.

"Here," she said. She walked toward Mary as she had first walked in the dress, gliding, her body light and tall. She cradled the hat tenderly, the way she held the dress, the way she would hold her mother's old china tea cup and saucer before flinging them, one by one, onto the kitchen floor. "*This* one, Mary," she said and forced her lips into a smile, "suits the dress much better. Doesn't it?"

Her nameless Someone appeared, holding a piece of broken glass. How easy, she thought, to destroy something you so desperately want. She stood calmly in front of Mary, her eyes never leaving the other woman's face. Her hands began to squeeze protectively around the hat. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the dress lying on the cash desk, so close she could feel it on the tips of her fingers. She knew it well. Better than Mary, better even than the shop owner. It would never feel so fine as it would now. Her fingers would never feel so strong.

In the morning the mother took the child to the hospital in the city, and in the afternoon the grandmother arrived from Opal, an hour's drive away. By this time the mother and the child had been moved to a small, nearly empty wing on the third floor and were under strict orders not to remove the child from the room.

"It's history repeating itself," the grandmother said with a smile. "It's just like it was yesterday I was taking *you* to the hospital."

The mother thought she looked pleased. "History," she repeated flatly. She closed her eyes. She sat curled in the big lime-green chair, her head resting against it.

The older woman sat down and pulled the small child onto her lap. He was naked except for a one-piece undergarment over his diaper. It was warm in the room. The child's skin was hot. "I guess you can't get to the letter. Well, as long as it's safe, that's fine. You know you have my only copy."

The younger woman's chair was next to the crib. She slid a finger over the rods. Her nail made a faint pinging sound against the metal. Suddenly she grabbed a bar and gave a squeeze. "The letter is safe, Mother," she said firmly. "It's right by the computer." To herself she added, "and if you ask me one more time, I'm going to break something."

The older woman leaned far back in the chair, as if she had been pushed. "You don't have to get excited, dear. I know you're anxious about Andrew." She smiled again. The child looked up at her at the sound of his name.

The younger woman rolled her eyes. "Mother, I do not want to fight. If you want to fight, go find someone else."

"I was just asking, Anna. Of course I don't want to fight."

"It's the look on your face. Mother, it's a long weekend. No businesses are going to be open Easter Monday, so what's the rush?" She wished they could be through all this, this unnecessary, annoying way of talking. They seemed to talk in circles all the time. She was weary of it.

"No rush, no rush. Did the doctors say anything about Andrew?"

"No. They want him here for observation. It could be anything."

"Useless, these doctors. They never have any answers. No one's in charge. Anyway, it's genetic, all those allergies. And as long as you and Jason keep smoking and you live in a place with an old carpet, Andrew will always be sick. I tore out all the carpets when you kids were little and made your father quit smoking. It's the only thing that works. You have no choice." The older woman's voice grew louder and more excited as she spoke. Her cheeks had become redder and her eyes had a glassy, excited shine.

The more agitated and intense her mother became, the more Anna grew subdued. It certainly wasn't going to make things better for the child, she thought. She turned her head toward the window. It was long and narrow and ran from Andrew's eye level to the ceiling and was partially covered by striped grey and pink curtains. She could make out another wing of the hospital, with its identical rows of tiny windows. Only a small patch of the sky was visible. She thought she could see a piece of cloud.

Anna looked over at her mother. "Jason might get a transfer," she said. "To Grande Prairie." Jason had first learned of the possibility four or five weeks ago, and they still didn't know whether it might become real, or when. Until now, she hadn't told anyone. She couldn't imagine moving so far away, and into the middle of nowhere. But lately the idea had become more appealing.

"Oh," said the grandmother abruptly. "Then I suppose you won't visit me anymore. I hope you take care of the letter before you go."

The child slid off the grandmother's lap and crawled under the crib. It was an old, monstrous-looking crib. Its sides reached nearly to the ceiling, and the mattress lay about four feet from the floor. Andrew peered through the bars of the lowered front piece and cried "Out!" Anna smiled. She had no idea whether his shout was a command, a wish, or merely a description.

"I know what you mean, little one," the grandmother said. "When you get older, or when you're sick, your body is a prison. You're living in a prison. You want out. Out, out. Say it, little one."

Anna looked horrified. "Don't tell him things like that."

"He knows it anyway. He's sick." She watched him for a minute. "We have something in common. You don't know what it's like unless you've been through it yourself."

"He's fine," Anna said loudly.

The child started to cry.

"It's OK, Andrew, we're not fighting," Anna said cheerfully. "He hates fighting," she said to her mother in a softer voice. She watched her child quietly. She wasn't sure now why she had asked her mother to come. She felt that Andrew needed all she had right now. He needed her love in a slightly distanced way, not a smothering, worried way, but she was too tired to play with him or even to talk to him.

"Maybe Jason has a minute to fax the letter," the grandmother said. Anna saw that her mother had that dark, round-eyed look. Like there was so much more she wanted to say. Anna wished she'd just say it, instead of jumping around all the time.

"Mother, can it wait till we deal with Andrew?" Anna pleaded.

"Of course!" the grandmother said. She forced a smile. "I'm not asking you to do anything right now. But you know it's important."

Anna tried to remember what the letter was about. Something to do with her mother's car. And a mechanic. She wanted to fax the Better Business Bureau and the AMA and all her friends. She wanted to tell them not to go to that mechanic. She insisted she wouldn't even drive the car till everything was all sorted out. She only drove her car today, she had explained when Anna asked, because of the crisis with the baby. Crisis. One of the doctors had said it was no big deal, send the child home, a sicker child could use the bed. But Anna's mother had arrived by then and insisted another doctor see the child.

The door opened and a nurse entered. Anna held the child while the nurse pulled a cord from an electric monitor and fastened a plastic device to the boy's big toe. The monitor read his pulse rate and the level of oxygen in his blood. Lights

flashed and the machine beeped repeatedly. The boy squirmed and cried, a hard, angry cry. Then the nurse prepared his Ventolin. The mother felt the child begin to relax when the nurse stepped away. She remembered what Jason had said about the x-rays. It was like some kind of medieval torture chamber, he said. The boy's hands were bound high over his head to a metal bar. His ankles were fastened tightly to a rod. *Like these metal bars*, Jason said, and shook the side of the crib so that it rattled. The boy screamed and wriggled like a monkey in chains, he said. He'll have nightmares, he said. Can't we just take him home, he pleaded, his voice and his eyes hollowed by concern and lack of sleep.

"It's genetic. You're going through everything I went through." The grandmother smiled when Anna looked over at her. Then her face began to change. It looked tighter. "Maybe I can go home with Jason when he goes and do the letter with him," she said.

Anna was trying to remember what else Jason had said about the x-rays. He had stopped abruptly, though, after rattling the crib. Anna remembered the nightmares she'd started having recently. Since becoming pregnant for the second time, she had been having dreams of shouting at her mother, over and over, in an uncontrollable rage. She finally told Jason about the dreams when she began to shout so loud she woke both of them.

"That's my only copy, the one I left you."

Anna turned to her mother. She had been looking much older, at least since the child was born. And she had stopped doing almost everything except make furniture

and toys and clothing for the baby. It was as if the baby was the only thing in her life. Anna told herself her son looked fine, except that he was a little pale. Until now, he had been running around the room and trying to climb on all the furniture. Now, he was simply worn out. She wanted to ask a nurse, was that normal. But the nurses were on the go all the time. They had to ask his name every time they came in.

"You'll probably be out by tomorrow," the grandmother went on. "We can all take shifts till then. Jason can relieve you first thing in the morning. Call him, so he doesn't sleep in. Call him around six. If you have to be up that early, so should he," she said bluntly. "I'll get your brother to come too. I don't know why your father isn't here at a time like this. He's probably off with some woman. Of course the doctor won't come by. There aren't even any nurses. Just that young aid. If I were bleeding, I wouldn't come to a hospital. Not on a holiday weekend. I'd wait till the weekend was over."

"That was a nurse."

"Pardon?"

"The woman who prepared the Ventolin. She was a nurse." Anna looked up at the clock on the wall. "I wish they'd bring him some food. He usually eats by now. He's upset enough as it is."

"Of course Jason won't do the letter," the grandmother said. "He never does anything."

"What?" Anna didn't think she'd heard right.

"I said Jason never does anything."

"Mother!" Anna shouted. "Stop saying that."

"You don't know what the letter means. I finally found a mechanic who agreed that there was a problem. Everyone else kept telling me it was all in my mind. I was making it all up, the car was fine. But I knew better. You don't know how good it feels to have someone find the problem."

"I don't even know what the problem is."

"You'll feel the same way when they tell you what's wrong with Andrew."

"What if it's nothing? We're just having tests done. He's just here for observation."

"They don't keep you in overnight just for tests. Not in Alberta."

The door opened. A young woman holding a tray walked briskly to the highchair. The tray had a plastic plate covered with silver foil, and a glass of milk. The boy tried to squirm off Anna's lap when he saw the open door. Anna held him until the aid left. She hung the Ventolin tube over the side of the crib and carried the child to the highchair. Another aid had brought it at mid-day. Then, Anna had thought one meal was all the child would have to endure in this place.

"I'm getting to know this hospital well," the grandmother said. "I've had so many tests done here in the last few years. Tomorrow I'll be getting some done on the floor right below you. I could sleep here with you and Andrew."

"What for?" Anna pulled the silver foil off the plate and steam poured out. Andrew grabbed for the food and she held his hand back.

"So I wouldn't have to drive back and forth."

"No, what are the tests for?" She blew on the peas and carrots. She remembered reading a memo in *Harper's Magazine* about why patients should be sent home sooner. The last point on the memo was: Hospital food tastes bad.

"They can't figure out what's wrong with my left shoulder. Nobody knows. I was so happy when I got back positive results from the tests I had done in January. The other doctors had been telling me all along that there was nothing there."

"What were those tests for?" Anna asked distractedly. She cut the piece of rubbery chicken.

"Oh, I'll tell you some other time. Your mind is on Andrew right now. I can tell."

Anna watched her child's face. He shoved peas and carrots into his mouth with his tiny fist. He's fine, she told herself again. He's just fine. She thought of Jason's description of the x-ray room and wondered why it was necessary to put someone through that. She and Jason didn't tell the grandmother about it. She'd take some curious pleasure in feeling pity for the child. Or she'd remember she'd had tests just like those, once. She'd tell them how awful it was, in a tone of heavy gloom.

"It was the same with my car."

"What?"

"It was the same with my car. They kept telling me it was fine. I had to go for a second opinion. Always go for a second opinion. Or a third. Don't listen if they tell you nothing's wrong with Andrew. These things are life-threatening. It will be with him forever."

Anna was beginning to feel sick. She poured milk from the glass into Andrew's bottle. The child, who normally ate heartily, had eaten very little. She didn't know whether to be truly concerned or not. The grandmother was always worried. She told Anna something terrible was going to happen to him, she could feel it. Anna still didn't know if she should be here at all. And no one would tell her anything. But Andrew looked fine. He looked fine. She just wanted to take him home. And the nurses still wouldn't let her take him out of the room.

"It's your smoking. It will kill the child."

Anna talked to her son playfully and tickled his feet. He grinned, showing a few tiny teeth. Anna smiled, relieved that he was responding normally.

"I made your father quit. Told him I could leave him if he didn't. With you kids. And I tore out all the carpets. Things didn't get any better for us. It'll be the same for you. You'll see. You're young now. You're still so much in love you don't think about these things."

Anna frowned but didn't say anything. The child grabbed for her necklace. She leaned back and dangled it in front of him.

"I suppose I should be going," the grandmother said, standing and staring out the narrow window.

The door opened again. It was Jason. He smiled at the grandmother. "Thanks for coming, Sherry," he said. He hugged Anna with one arm and cupped the child's face with his hand. He looked calm, but Anna knew he was nervous. She reached up

and put her hand on his. Then Jason pulled away. "I brought you a sandwich. And a diet Coke."

"Jason, before I forget I have to ask you about the letter," the grandmother said.

He looked at her blankly. "The letter."

"The one about her car," Anna snapped. "The one she wants us to fax," she said angrily. She looked at Jason with a pinched, anxious face. It was only when her mother was there, or said things about her and Jason, that she ever snapped at Jason. She knew it had nothing to do with him, but she couldn't help herself. The words came out too fast.

"What's wrong with you?" the grandmother asked.

Anna looked away. She thought of the times she had tried to explain. She couldn't anymore. She was too tired. Nothing meant anything. Sometimes, her mother would respond by telling Anna and everyone to shut up. To just shut up and leave her alone.

"OK. The letter. What about it?" Jason asked.

"Well, can you do it?"

Jason nodded slowly. "I'm sure I can —"

"It's my only copy. I want to get this straightened out. I finally found someone who believed me. I'm sure you two don't, but that's your business."

Jason looked a little dazed. He didn't know whether to nod his head or acknowledge her request in some other way, or to deny the possibility of a disbelief

that hadn't yet occurred to him. His son called to him then, and he pulled the boy from the highchair.

"It won't take you long," the grandmother went on. "We could set up a time tomorrow and I could watch you do it. The letter needs a few changes."

Jason laughed when his son pulled at his nose. He carried the boy over to the window, out of the way of the highchair and the crib. Anna stood beside them.

"That's where you're going soon," Jason said to the boy, pointing outside.

"Has anybody seen my purse?" the grandmother asked.

"Did he eat anything?" Jason asked.

Anna shook her head. "Not much. He missed you." She could feel herself beginning to relax, now that Jason had come. Now that it did not require so much of her energy to be herself. She moved in close to that she could feel him against her.

"I'm sure I left my purse somewhere."

"He's happy now that you're here," Anna said. "No," she said in a louder tone to her mother. She frowned slightly. She could feel her shoulders becoming tense.

"Why don't you sit down and have that sandwich? You must be starving," Jason said.

"*Hasn't anyone seen my purse?*" the grandmother shouted.

Jason and Anna turned to her. "I said no," Anna said in a hard voice. She sat on the big green chair and opened the Coke. For a minute she held it against the side of her cheek without drinking. The can was cool and damp against her face. She wanted

to be home, in her bed. She wanted to sleep and sleep. She wanted to be away from here.

"History repeats itself," the grandmother said again. "You think this is the first time you'll be here worrying about your child. You'll be back here again and again, I can tell you. It doesn't get any better." Anna saw the troubled look in her eyes, watched her working her teeth over her lower lip. She felt the familiar tug of empathy, then sorrow, wear away at her annoyance.

Jason growled playfully at the boy. He squealed and Anna giggled, relieved that the child could so easily take her mind off things. She closed her eyes.

"I guess I'm not needed any more," the grandmother said. "Everybody's ignoring me. Even the little one."

Jason and Anna didn't hear. A few minutes later, the child looked toward the door and shouted "Gone!" Anna glanced over at the door in time to see it close. The grandmother had left, the way she always came and went, in a kind of scattered haste. Jason and Anna looked at each other in confusion. They could feel her presence in the quiet moments that followed. She was still there. "Gone!" the child repeated, and looked from Anna to Jason as if he expected a response. Anna opened her mouth to speak, because there was always something to say about the grandmother in the minutes following her whirlwind departures, something that continued to niggle away at her, something about the visit, but she saw then that to speak would be to keep her there with them, longer, longer. Instead she got up and stood with Jason and the child

by the window, watching the tiny piece of blue-grey sky swirl and change colour and move on.

Saturday morning the girl started up her car. It was cold and the engine was slow to respond. The windows were thick with frost. The boy sat on the seat beside her and pulled the seatbelt across his chest. In the back seat was the coat.

"I have a map," the boy said. He was trying to get the girl's attention. The map was so new it was still folded along its original folds. "Do you need a map?"

"No," the girl said.

The girl focused on the road ahead of her. Driving made her uneasy. You could never tell what another driver might do. And what if you suddenly had to scratch your calf muscle, or the small of your back, and you needed to change gears at the same time? And what if Hal asked her again what she thought of his mother, like would she always be afraid of her or something, just as she was inching forward to make a left turn onto the Whitemud and hesitating even for a second would mean she'd miss her chance and the guy behind her would start blaring his horn? Because she wasn't.

"It's a good thing about the coat," the boy said. "I mean, that you don't need it now that they have this call out for winter coats for the poor."

It was a size 16, much too big for the girl. The boy's mother had given it to her when she accidentally got pregnant last fall. A month later she had a miscarriage. Since then the coat had been hanging in the closet by the door, right there where they could see it every time they stepped inside the apartment. It was starting to get in the way now. There was hardly any room in that little closet with all their winter coats and

summer coats and sweaters. The girl didn't mind it as a coat, except that it was so loose. And it hung down past her knees. It wasn't even like she wanted it or anything. She didn't ask for it. But then one day in the middle of December they saw on the ITV news something about the need for coats in the inner city. All you had to do was drop them off at one of the thrift stores downtown. Hal got so excited he nearly knocked his dinner off his lap.

"We could, like, do something good, Van," Hal said.

The girl stared at him, kind of a dark stare, but he wasn't looking right then. She was still waiting for him to get a job so he wouldn't keep her up so late at night and make her tired for work. That would be something good. But every time she said something about it, they got into a fight. That was the only thing they fought about. Ever since last fall, after she got the coat, they started having this insane argument. Hal wanted to know how he could have a job when he was going to university. She told him all university did was take his money, or his mother's at least, and how was it going to get him a job anyway. He said she just didn't understand. When he said that she shut up. But she didn't forget about it.

"Like what," the girl said. She looked at the boy's clear face for a second, at his eyelashes flicking gently against his glasses, and then back at Bill the weatherman, only half-listening. He never really made much sense to her.

"Well, there's that coat from Mum," he said, sitting up straight and setting his plate on the carpet. He gets it from his mother, the girl thought. She's the one who volunteers for charities. His mother went from door to door asking for donations

during heart month and cancer month and lung month. Every month there was something. The girl didn't think it did any good, other than make Hal's mother feel like she was doing something good. The girl knew the mother didn't give her the coat because she wanted to, but because it was a *good thing*. His mother still hated her, the girl knew that. She wasn't like them. Hal was too good for her. Hal would grow up soon and see that. The girl heard all these things from Hal's mother, even though she didn't actually say them.

"That's my coat," the girl protested.

"Not really," the boy replied. "Besides, you don't wear it. You don't need it," he added.

A month later the boy finally persuaded the girl to drive downtown to a thrift store. She didn't really want to go just for him. So she wasn't talking to him. He hadn't even asked her if she minded giving away her coat. She didn't really want it, because it had come from Hal's mother and it wasn't her style. It wasn't even a proper maternity coat. It was just a coat Hal's mother didn't want to wear anymore. No one would even have known she was pregnant in it. But it was still her coat.

Hal flipped his long bangs over his head and stared thoughtfully into the car exhaust surrounding the car. "Sure is cold out there," he said. "That coat's gonna make someone really warm."

"Where should I park?" the girl asked when they saw the thrift store.

"Don't they have free parking somewhere?"

"Not downtown."

"Let's just park in that loading zone out front. We'll only be five minutes," the boy said. He was smiling. The girl was tired from staying up late and drinking too much. She'd had to close down the café last night. Friday was her night to close down. And here they were, up early, and the boy acting like they were off to see his long lost sister after twenty years or something. Practically turning red from smiling so hard.

The boy offered to carry the coat. He draped it over his left arm, gently, like he was a fancy waiter. "You don't have to come in," he said.

"No, I'll come," the girl said reluctantly.

It was cold, thirty below or colder. The girl hunched her shoulders against the wind and ran with the boy to the store. Inside, her eyes sought out the women working between the rows of clothing and the one behind the cash register near the door. They were so pale, and their eyes were tired.

"Where do we go?" she asked the boy.

"The back," he said confidently. "Drop-off is at the back."

They made their way down the dress aisle. Pieces of cardboard with size 6, size 8, and size 10 handwritten in black felt pen stuck out at various points along the row. The girl's eyes scanned the shelves of shoes along the back wall. Bright red, dark green, shiny gold. High high heels. On the floor, a pile of handbags spilled out of a cardboard box.

They stopped at an open doorway and stood looking into a small room, something like a large closet. A woman was working alone, with her back to the door.

She leaned over a box of clothes and pulled out a sweater, shook it, and folded it on a pile of sweaters beside her. Then she leaned over again, pulled out another sweater, and gave it a shake. The girl and the boy waited in silence.

Finally the boy cleared his throat and said nervously, "We'd like to donate a coat to your winter coat campaign."

The woman turned and looked up at them. She had short curly hair, thin and dry and frizzy from too many perms. She breathed heavily and her cheeks were shiny. "What's that?" she asked loudly.

They stood close together, the boy and the girl, the boy slightly in front. He held the coat as if it was the most precious thing he had. The girl, at least, had never seen him hold anything like this before. His own coat he always slung over his shoulder or under his arm. He flung it in the bottom of the coat closet when he came home. The girl felt the woman's eyes move over them, checking them out. A tingling feeling moved from her belly up to her chest. She felt like she was naked, like the woman could see everything inside them. She wondered what they had done wrong. She pulled at the frayed cuff of her grey sweatshirt and waited.

The boy said, "We'd like to donate a coat to your coat campaign. Coats for people in need." That was how they said it on ITV. It sounded so much grander then. The boy held up the coat with both arms. The girl, leaning against him, could feel his arms begin to shake a little under the weight of the coat.

"Oh, you've come to the wrong place, dear. They're doing that down at the Bissell Centre," the woman said bluntly.

"But we thought we could give it away here," the boy blurted.

The girl slipped her hand into her pocket and fiddled with her lighter. She could've killed for a smoke.

"We *sell* 'em here. Anyways, we're full right up now." She rose slowly and looked around at the swollen cardboard boxes stacked three or four high and the clothes piled on shelves. "We've got all these to clean and sort and iron." Her voice became high and light. "Clean and sort and iron." She stopped abruptly and squinted at the boy and the girl. "This isn't the coat campaign place," she said firmly.

"Couldn't you take it anyway?" the boy asked. The girl watched him. He seemed so eager suddenly to give away her coat.

"This isn't the place," the woman repeated casually. "Now I have to get through all this before the boss gets back or there'll be hell to pay."

You could see that, the girl thought. The woman had droplets of sweat on her forehead.

"Let's go, Hal," the girl said, pulling at his jacket sleeve.

"But —" the boy stared down at the coat. "It's a good coat," he said.

"Try the Bissell Centre," the woman said, turning back to her box of clothes. "They have the coat campaign."

The girl stared at the woman, taken aback by her disinterest in the coat. For no reason she felt like she would cry. She shoved the thought away and turned, pulling the boy with her. They walked slowly through the sweater aisle, past the size 16 marker, the 14, the 12, the 10. The girl was remembering the clothes she and her sister got

every year in September, clothes other people had worn and just never seemed to get completely clean-smelling and never fit exactly. It was like there was nothing in the world that had been made to fit her. And now she had this horrid red coat that was too big. If only Hal's mother hadn't given her the coat. Everything had been fine in her life until then. Now, she and Hal fought almost all the time. Now, she felt she owed Hal's mother something. For the coat. Or owed Hal something. I never asked for it, the girl wanted to say. But she couldn't casually toss it away, the way Hal could.

They walked past the cash desk and the boy put his hand on the door.

"I'll ring that up for you here." The voice came from behind the cash desk.

The boy and the girl froze. They turned slowly and looked at the woman, hoping she meant someone else. She frowned at them. "I'll take that here." When they didn't move, she said loudly, "You can't just walk out with that, you know." She began punching numbers into her cash register. The machine rang shrilly through the store. The girl looked around. Customers were watching from behind racks of dresses and slacks. She could feel her cheeks growing hot.

"But," the boy began, "it's ours. We wanted to give it away, but —" His face was turning red, too.

"Yeah, I've heard that one before," the woman said in the same loud voice. "You've probably taken the price tag off, too. It's going for fifteen dollars. I priced it myself the day it came in," she announced.

The boy and the girl stared at her in silence. "It's my coat," the girl said. "I was —" She stopped, searching for the word. She hadn't said it since the day in

November she woke up and saw the blood. "I was pregnant," she said, and looked down at herself in confusion. She felt a heavy shame move through her as she tried to connect the words to her own body.

"Of course it's not your coat." The woman waited. "Do I have to call the manager?" she demanded. "He's seen the likes of you before, you know."

The boy gave the girl a questioning look.

"Actually," the boy said, his face brightening as an idea came to him, "we changed our minds. We don't want it." He set the coat on the cash desk and started for the door.

"You don't think you can get off like this, do you?" the woman asked sharply. "Let me see some I.D. I want to know who you are. I'm sick of the way kids get off with everything these days."

Except for the loud voice of the woman behind the cash desk, the store had gone completely silent. The store seemed very large suddenly, and the stillness took on a heaviness that pushed down on the girl's shoulders. She thought that every customer, every coat hanger and sweater and pair of shoes was waiting for her to speak. She stiffened. From the corner of her eye she cold see an officer writing up a ticket in front of her car. Her eyes moved up to the "loading zone - five minutes" sign. The officer took forever, writing, looking at his watch, writing, looking at the car, writing. She frowned and pulled out her wallet. Her tips from the night before were still there, light pink two-dollar bills scrunched in with her coins. She pulled out seven bills and a loonie and lay them on the cash desk.

She turned to face Hal suddenly. He stood watching her with a tight, pinched face, as if he were holding back something. He had never looked at her like that before, but she knew that expression. It was his mother's. His mother had looked at her with the same intense dislike.

"I just want to get rid of it," he whispered fiercely.

She looked away quickly and pulled the coat from the cash desk, holding it against herself. Somehow it gave her some comfort just then, but she knew that one night very soon, when no one was home, she would go to Hal's mother's. She would make a fire in the living room fire place and burn the coat. She wouldn't even tell Hal. It would be just her and the coat. She could already see flames leaping across the coat, devouring it. She could see the coat turning black and vanishing. Then she would finally forget about it. And Hal and Hal's mother.

The woman was frowning at her. She painstakingly unfolded the bills, one by one, and smoothed them out on the counter. "That'll do then," she said abruptly. "Take the coat. But don't come back, you hear?"

The girl hated driving. She never knew what another driver might do or what the boy might suddenly ask.

On Wednesday morning Annie woke and saw what she would do. She would get up and make breakfast as usual. Not just any old breakfast. Today it would be a cheese and mushroom omelette and toast and cream for the coffee. A true Sunday breakfast, the kind she used to make for Steve. Then she would drive Steve to the airport, wait with him till his flight was announced, wave him through the checkpoint, and drive to work as if today were a day like any other. She wouldn't say anything to anyone there. After work, she would go home and tell the boarders to leave. Right then. She would just tell them to pack their things and go. Hard as nails, like her dead mother.

She wouldn't make supper for them. She wouldn't have a fit over their dirty dishes and ashtrays lying about. She wouldn't call first and ask if they were out of beer or cigarettes and offer to replenish them. She wouldn't even remind them that they were behind in their board money. They would know it by the look on her face. Then, she would go outside with Lacey while Gemma and Ross packed their things. No one would be calling her Marshmallow anymore after that. Marshmallow. Softie. She could laugh at those words now.

They'd go for a walk, if Lacey weren't pregnant. Instead they'd just go down the dirt driveway as far as the road and watch the cars returning from the beach. Annie's place was in Cawarral on the Yeppoon-Rockhampton road. This was how the road was, most evenings: couples on mopeds. Tired parents with even tireder kids. Tourists crammed into Rothery's coaches. A woman and a dog, about to give birth.

After Ross and Gemma left, on the weekend probably, Annie would have someone come and take away the sin bin that was slowly sinking into the front yard. Ross and Gemma had brought it with them when they moved in, saying they'd sleep there. Of course they never did. For three years now the old white ute had been sitting there rusting. After it was gone she'd be able to clear away the petals from the frangipani and bauhinia trees cluttering the lawn. She would do this for Steve. Never again would she come home to the three of them sitting around playing cards and waiting for her to get the dinner on and mow the lawn for the neighbour. That was a job Annie had got for Steve. He said he wasn't inclined to do it lately so Annie did it because they needed the money. She was paying for his trip to Fiji with the mowing money. Steve reckoned there'd be work for him in Fiji. In shipping. If he stayed, Annie would join him later. Annie knew it was really just a holiday. He'd be back in a week, two max, downright bored with beaches and beer. Today, she was going to make him a special breakfast. Just him. And be hard as nails to the boarders. It was her home, after all.

Annie lay in bed for a few minutes, imagining how it would be, with just the two of them again. By now, she had already moved herself, mentally at least, from the place she occupied by the sink, watching the three of them playing cards, to a seat at the table with Steve, with Lacey back in the house again, on her mat. Annie had to visualise herself at the table over and over because on some days she was nearly invisible. She knew this because of the day last winter she walked in from the back yard. She got as far as the fridge before anyone noticed her.

Never had she woken to such a pleasant morning. Streaks of sunlight peered seductively through the flame tree. Parrots and cockatoos called out to each other. Suddenly it dawned on her that Steve wasn't there. She turned and stared at the empty spot on the bed beside her. Not once in the fourteen years she'd been with him had he woken before her. Annie sat up in alarm, slid her small feet into her slippers, and padded softly to the kitchen.

Steve was sitting at the table, in his usual spot, his back to the far wall. He took a sip from his cup. Annie smelled coffee. Steve had never made coffee. He said he couldn't do it, Annie did it better. She stared at him in silence. His hair was combed back over his head, wet and dark. He had got up and showered and she hadn't noticed. He'd even shaved already. He was wearing a green shirt that had been left hanging on the line last night. It was ironed, and she hadn't done it.

Annie was speechless for a few moments. Then she tried to laugh. "Steve! What are you doing up so early?"

"Just wanted to be ready, that's all," Steve said casually.

"But you packed your bags last night. And I had your white shirt all ready for you." Steve didn't respond. Annie asked, "How's the coffee?" Annie always made the first pot and Gemma made the coffee for the guys after Annie went to work.

"Not bad, actually." He smiled. "Go figger."

"At thirty-two you finally learn! Your own mother wouldn't know you."

There was another silence. Annie moved her eyes over Steve and his coffee cup, confused. Usually she got up, showered, made breakfast for Steve and the

boarders, and drove to work. Now she didn't know what to do first. She turned to the fridge in a panic. "I'll make your breakfast then. I had a special breakfast planned. This is your big day, going to Fiji. First time in a plane, right." Annie opened the fridge and began to pull out the eggs and milk and bacon in a frenzy.

"You don't have to make anything. They'll feed me on the plane."

But Annie was already tearing strips of bacon from the package and laying them in a frying pan. When there was no room left in the pan she layered the remaining strips on top. "This is a special day, I'm making you a special breakfast," Annie said, trying to sound cheerful. She cracked a few eggs into a bowl, wondering. It had been so long since she'd made an omelette, she couldn't remember how it was done. No problem, she thought, she'd wing it.

"Aren't you going to get dressed?" Steve asked.

Annie beat the eggs briskly. She poured milk into the bowl, splashing herself. "Yes."

"Is that enough for Gemma and Ross?" Steve asked. He was their constant advocate. They were guests as much as boarders, he insisted. It wasn't their fault there was no work, he said.

Annie opened her mouth to say, "They can make their own," but caught herself. She and Steve had talked, once, about asking Ross and Gemma to go. Mainly because they were so behind in their board money. It was Steve who invited them here originally. He and his brother were at a rodeo one day when they met Gemma and Ross. Steve asked her please not to make them leave. He told her they'd clean the

house if only she didn't do it first. How could they do anything, when she had already done it? And if they left, he said, who would he play cards with? What would he do? He'd be miserable. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement, he said, stumbling over the long words but looking pleased with himself nonetheless. He was smiling, but Annie saw fear in his eyes, fear at the prospect of being alone all day. Annie felt the same surge of loss as when Ross and Gemma first moved in and Steve gave himself over to them. As if he didn't need her as much. She and Steve had been alone together since high school. There'd never been anyone else. They did things together, like working the seasonal jobs. Then Annie's mother died and they moved into her house, and only a year later Ross and Gemma moved in. Since then, Steve had stopped looking for work.

"Of course," she said now, and began to crack open more eggs. Once she started, she couldn't stop. She had lost count after the first few and didn't really mind now how many she cracked open. She picked up the last egg with desperation, realising there were no more. It slipped from her wet fingers to the floor.

"What are you doing, Annie?" Steve asked, frowning. He got up. "I'll be outside having a smoke."

Annie scooped up the raw egg, pushing it half-way across the kitchen floor before she got all of it.

Gemma strolled into the kitchen, yawning and groggy. Ross was behind her, holding her around the waist, his face buried in her thick hair.

"Annie!" Gemma said, looking wide-awake suddenly. "Aren't you going to be late?"

Annie couldn't think of anything to say. She stared from the stove to Gemma, then went to have a shower. As the water streamed over her, she doggedly willed the day to start over. She tried to recapture the feeling she had woken with. It had been so pleasant. And so easy. Her willing herself back to the table, next to Steve. Not being invisible, like that day last winter. The three of them were there, Gemma in the middle against the long wall with her legs crossed and the guys on either side as usual, their long legs stretched out in front of them. Steve's back was against the small bit of wall, his back to Annie as she entered. His dark brown eyes were focused steadily on Ross, who was sorting his hand. Gemma was staring at her cards. Steve's foot slowly slid forward till it rested on Gemma's. Her other foot moved over on top of his. Her lips curled up so slightly, when Steve's foot touched hers, that Annie wouldn't have noticed if she hadn't looked just then. Annie continued on through the kitchen, opened the fridge door, and asked, loudly, if anyone wanted a beer.

"Jesus, woman, where'd you come from?" Steve sputtered, pulling his legs under his chair and sitting up straight. He gripped his cards with both hands.

"Do you walk through walls?" Ross said with a surprised laugh. His fingers splayed carefully over the pennies in front of him. He was winning.

"Don't do that again!" Steve choked. Gemma stared stiffly at her cards.

Annie continued on into her bedroom and found the book she'd been reading. *Tirra Lirra By the River*. She wasn't a beer drinker herself. She wasn't even a card

player. Her mind played tricks on her, she knew that. She saw things that weren't there. That was why they wouldn't let her play cards. She could never remember who played what card, when. So they said.

When she stepped out of the shower she heard Lacey whining near the back door. She knew nobody would let her in. She had a feeling, suddenly, that today would be the day. Today, Lacey would have her puppies. Annie felt a nervous twisting in her stomach. Lacey was their first dog, their first pet even. She and Steve had bought her together when they moved into the house. "Our baby," she joked to the girls at work.

She towel-dried her hair and returned to the kitchen. Steve, Gemma, and Ross were sitting around the table the way they always did, so naturally that Annie thought for a second that things were back to normal, that the morning had just begun. Steve was at the far end, his back to the wall, where he could see everything that happened in the room. Or almost everything. Gemma sat with her legs crossed. Ross's right foot tapped a slow beat.

"So what are you all doing sitting there watching the omelette burn?" Annie scolded.

"Well, you always do everything. What are we supposed to do?" Gemma asked. She pulled at a strand of her long hair. Annie thought suddenly that it would have been nice hair if she hadn't dyed it blond and permed it. Somewhere, in both Gemma and Ross, there must be the potential for something *nice*, but for the most part she hadn't given it any thought.

"We have to leave now," Steve said quietly. He was tapping the table with his taut fingers. "I'll be late for my flight."

Annie looked toward the back door. Through the screen she saw the flicker of Lacey's tail as the dog made her way back to her doghouse. "Right, I'll check on Lacey when I get in tonight."

Annie maintained the Student Records database in Student Administration. The city university was small, but the names on the colour-coded sheets of paper remained faceless names and the I.D. numbers, utterly meaningless. The forms passed her desk in irregular, but endless, spurts. Pink for add, blue for drop. She contented herself with the fact that she never keyed any wrong. Her uptight supervisor, Sonia, walked and breathed the nearly paralysing nighmare that Annie was, at every keystroke, prone to crucial and horrific typographical errors. Annie sometimes wondered how the horror would manifest itself should she one day key in a non-existent I.D. number or assign a student to Botany rather than Romance Linguistics. Part of Sonia's concern, Annie suspected, stemmed from the fact that Annie's previous work experience had been hauling shrimp in off nets down by Cooee Bay. Before that, she had shorn sheep up in Biloela. Sonia's anxieties were more amusing than troubling to Annie.

Today, Annie worked very slowly. She was pondering how she would be able to leave early in order to see to Lacey. Ross and Gemma would never tend to her, no matter how much pain Lacey was in. Annie imagined Lacey in her doghouse, alone, and felt ill.

As it was, Annie had arrived late. She had taken the long way back from the airport. She couldn't possibly leave early now. On her desk was a stack of pink and blue pieces of paper. And yellow ones, for address changes. She couldn't understand why students had to move four or five times in a year. Later today or tomorrow, she would spend hours at the laminating machine in the library basement, laminating the graduating students' transcripts. Days like today, she wanted to murder the Registrar for dreaming up these demented tasks.

Annie glanced at her watch fitfully throughout the day. Normally she phoned home several times a day. To see how Steve was doing, to see if they were out of XXXX or Victorian Bitter or whatever they were drinking. The day before, she called shortly after lunch and the phone rang and rang. No one answered. That had been happening a lot in the past few weeks. Annie couldn't figure out what they might be doing. They didn't have a car. They never went outside. A few minutes later Steve called and asked if that was her calling. No, they didn't need any beer, Annie didn't have to keep bringing beer and cigarettes. What were they doing, she asked by way of response, though she knew. Who was winning, she wanted to know, though she knew that, too. Ross. Ross always won.

She didn't want to call, now that Steve wasn't there. She never called to speak to Gemma or Ross. But she had an overwhelming urge to know what was happening in her house. To know how it was doing throughout the course of the day. How it was being walked in and breathed in. Which rooms Ross and Gemma moved in. Whether they were playing cards, now that Steve wasn't there.

"Annie," Sonia said sharply. Annie looked up at her. Sonia looked cross. She always looked cross. "You're talking to yourself again."

It was hard to avoid being overheard. Their desks were jammed together in the corner, head to head, their computer cables piled on the desks between the monitors. Most of the time, Annie was able to hide behind the monitor. "Just thinking out loud," she said.

"Has Lacey had her pups yet?"

Annie looked at her suspiciously. Sonia never asked about her home, let alone her dog. "No."

"When's she due?"

Annie moved a pink sheet to the side and stared at the next one. "Today."

"Oh." There was a silence. "Try to concentrate on your work. The numbers just can't be wrong," she said tersely, flushing a deep purple.

A few minutes later Annie picked up the phone and called her home number. After a dozen rings Gemma answered, sleepily.

"Jesus, Annie, I was asleep," Gemma yawned. Annie pictured her sitting in the kitchen chair under the phone shelf, hanging her head sleepily.

"Oh. I just wanted to know how Lacey was doing."

"Just hang on. Rawwwws!" she shouted. "Rawwwwwws! Where the hell are you?"

Annie heard the back door bang shut. She heard heavy steps on the kitchen floor and Ross shouting back to Gemma. "I don't know what the hell happened, Gemma. They're all dead. What'll we do, bury them before she gets home?"

"Shit, Ross, she's on the *phone*!" Gemma cried. She covered the phone with something, but Annie could still make out their voices.

"Who is?"

"Annie."

"Well, how's I supposed to know that? Oh man." Annie heard the back door bang shut again.

"Hey Annie I gotta go," Gemma said flatly.

"Right." Annie hung up.

Annie thought she was looking at the names and numbers on the pink and blue forms through a fog. This morning, so long, long ago, everything was so clear.

She drove home slowly, fitfully snatching at the feeling she'd had when she woke. She pulled into her driveway under the frangipani tree, next to the old ute. She walked into the house, her house, along the hall past the bedrooms and into the kitchen. Gemma and Ross sat up straight when they saw her. They watched in silence, their faces twisted with confusion, as she walked past them and out the back door.

Lacey was in her house, lying with her head in her paws. She looked up with big, vacant eyes when she saw Annie. Annie peered into the house, looking for the pups. Finally she saw them in the back of the house. So small and cold. She felt a fierce pain in her stomach. She touched each of the puppies briefly, wondering where

Steve was now. When she'd pulled up in the airport departure lane, he'd asked her not to get out with him. He told her it wasn't necessary. He touched her long hair then, picking up a few strands and staring past her at nothing. Kneeling next to Lacey, she felt, again, the same heavy, hard feeling that had come to her when she drove away from the airport.

She patted Lacey on the back and stood and walked to her house, hard as nails.

Afterword

> There is the story of the man trekking alone through the jungle. A panther is stalking him closely. For days the man hikes through the jungle, trying to stay clear of the panther. Finally, the man arrives in a small village, tired, hungry, distraught. He immediately alerts the villagers. There is a panther, the man cries. It has been chasing me for days. No one speaks or moves. Aren't you going to do anything about it? the man asks in despair, watching the villagers return to their usual routines. At last one of the villagers speaks. That is what panthers do, he says calmly.

It seems to me, at this stage in my writing life, that to comment on my own stories — why I wrote them, where they came from, what they are — is almost more difficult than to write the stories themselves. Stories are play. They are fanciful inventions, they are make-believe. They are stopping places, places to catch your breath — or have it taken away. The stories in *Zero Recall and other stories* have come to rest, momentarily, in a bizarre world, one that is peopled by characters like the man running from the panther, characters who often cannot make sense of their worlds while everyone around them can.

Inasmuch as we write to learn the stories of who we are and why we do what we do, the stories in this collection are fictional approaches to human responses toward that which is baffling, sometimes beyond understanding. The stories are essentially

realist. All but one are set in (sub)urban Alberta. They tend to be mood- or character-driven. More specifically, these stories are an exploration of the contemporary family, in particular the psychology and the economics of "familial" relationships. My curiosity about human behaviour is — in this collection at any rate — specifically concerned with that which makes us feel intensely, and in particular that which, for lack of a better word, hurts. For the most part, people appear to behave as one might expect them to; events appear to unfold as they are expected to. Yet people are often thrown together not by choice but by fate or simply ignorance. The world, in fiction and otherwise, is rarely what it seems. Something disrupts the usual order, something is misunderstood, something goes wrong.

To the degree that they are able, these stories also take up the relationship between truth and reality and fiction. Suzanne Ferguson points out in her essay "Defining the Short Story: Impressionism and Form" that "when all we have in the world is our own experience of it, all received knowledge becomes suspect, and the very nature of knowledge becomes problematic"; we must "confront the possibility that we cannot know anything for certain, that the processes we follow in search for truth may yield only fictions" (Ferguson 220). The characters in this collection, somewhat at odds with who they are and the spaces they occupy, move about, at times, with confusion or uncertainty, uncertain as they are of their place, or role, in the unfolding of events. While the stories in this collection are realist, they are "ungrounded," they are attempts at "impressionistic" depictions of mood or place or character. In her essay "The Flash of Fireflies," Nadine Gordimer comments on the fiction writer's manner of

sharing insight into character. She discusses the way in which the short story writer — unlike the novelist — may effectively say little but reveal a good deal, in particular insights into character. "Short story writers," she writes, "see by the light of the flash (of fireflies); theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of — the present moment. . . . A discreet moment of truth is aimed at — not *the* truth" (Gordimer 787). The stories offered here intend to aim toward such truths and such moments, however brief, of certainty.

Much of my reading, like my writing, has been of realist stories, though I hope to see them (both the reading and the writing) turn to the bizarre and absurd. Although I would not say that I have been strongly influenced by any one or two writers, I have focussed on certain short story writers, in particular for their portrayals of familial relationships, their psychological intensity, their often jarring and bizarre styles, their unity or tightness, and their harsh realism, one frequently disrupted by surrealistic undertones. These writers include, primarily, Raymond Carver, Shiga Naoya, and Flannery O'Connor. Carver's skeletal, "bare bones" use of language and stark, disturbing stories have — to my initial surprise — often triggered a jumping off point for some of my own. Many of the stories of Naoya portray a single incident occurring on a single day or evening (two of the stories in his *The Paper Door and Other Stories* are entitled "An Incident" and "Incident on the Afternoon of November Third"). O'Connor's stories, and those of Greg Hollingshead as well, grant the reader immediate entrance into intense, complex psychological worlds and portray troubling family relations.

I have also read with interest the short stories of Nawal El Saadawi, in particular for the ways in which she introduces and orders details or events, the perspectives she chooses, her matter-of-factness, the way she leaves so much unsaid, her precision, and her poetic use of language. Her stories seem to breathe; they have a careful pacing, a heartbeat almost.

It seems to me that you cannot survive (and, indeed, write) in Alberta without reading Canadian writers in abundance. To that end, I have turned to various short story writers, including Margaret Atwood, Wanda Blynn Campbell, Mavis Gallant, Kristjana Gunnars, Ruth Krahn, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Alice Munro, Rosemary Nixon, Sinclair Ross, Eunice Scarfe, Carol Shields, and Katherine Vlassie, largely for their evocation of place — or space — and the ways this is sustained. These writers, along with the others I have named here, frequently provide a stepping-off point into the creation of other fictional spaces through my own words.

Although I could say a good deal more about the short story here, I will say, briefly, that through the reading done in preparation for this collection, and the writing of the stories, I have come to understand how a story begins with a small thing, an object, a place, a tone, a character, and moves on from there. How a story is made interesting through detail — local, human, unexpected. How a story works through compression, intensity, the evocation or revealing of a particular consciousness or world, making the everyday or ordinary appear extraordinary, leaving out what is not necessary, leaving things, at times, unresolved, and, finally, a sense on the part of the writer of the complex relationship between truth, reality, and fiction. To approach

story, to create a stopping place for a reader — this must surely be a life-long endeavour.

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